# Walter Benjamin, Film and the ‘Anthropological-Materialist’ Project

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## Abstract

This thesis examines Walter Benjamin's film aesthetics within the framework of his 'anthropological-materialist' project. His writings on film are dispersed among essays, notes and letters and may appear at first sight to be an incoherent collection of thoughts on film. However, I will try to argue that they form part of the same philosophical and political project as his 'anthropological materialism.' Thus, these writings sought, first, to analyse the transformation of the human senses brought about by the appearance of film technology; and secondly, to envisage the possibility of undoing the alienation of the senses in modernity through that very same technology in order to, eventually, create a collective body (*Kollectivleib*) out of the audience. This project dates back to Benjamin's anthropological texts from the early 1920s and was central to texts such as *One-Way Street*, the Surrealism essay and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.' The reconfiguration of aesthetics as *aisthēsis* that takes place in the latter text is analysed as forming part of this project, in which Benjamin is concerned with the transformation of the human body according to its interaction with technology.

From this anthropological-materialist perspective, I address from the second chapter onwards the film figures—directors, actors, characters—and films that most concerned Benjamin. Thus, I analyse his writings on Soviet film with regard to the use and conception of technology in the country; the impact of the bungled reception of technology in Germany upon films from the Weimar Republic and National Socialism, especially in their representation of mass movements; the rehabilitation of allegory in the twentieth century with Charlie Chaplin and the possibility of undoing the numbing of the senses through his *gestic* and allegorical performance; and, finally, Mickey Mouse as a representative of the new barbarism that Benjamin advocated within his critique of bourgeois humanism.

**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………….iii

Abstract……………..…………………………………………………………………...v

Introduction…………..……………………………………………………………….1

Chapter 1. Walter Benjamin's Film Aesthetics in the Light of Anthropological Materialism...…………..………………………………………………………….21

First and Second Nature………………………..…………………………...30

Film and the Ruins of Second Nature……………………………………..…..35

The Optical Unconscious…..………………………………………..………...39

First and Second Technology……………..………………………………...47

*Aisthēsis*: the Aesthetics of Film Reception……………………..………….54

Chapter 2. Soviet Film: The Giant Laboratory of Technological Innervation..…….65

'On the Present Situation of Russian Film'..……………………...……...70

Questions about Technology………………………………..……………75

Technology and the Metabolism of the Earth……..………………………..85

'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz'………………………………...………...91

Refunctioning the Medium……………………..………………………...95

Groupings of Soviet Arts…………..……………………………………101

Chapter 3. German Film: The *Geist* of Technology………..……………………...109

‘Theories of German Fascism’………………………..………………..113

The *Kunstspolitik* of the ‘Work of Art’ Essay……………………………..117

The Monumental Quality of Mass Movements in UFA Productions...……126

Riefenstahl and Beautiful Semblance………..……..……………………..133

From the Aestheticisation of Politics to Human Annihilation..…………...140

Chapter 4. Charlie Chaplin: The Return of the Allegorical Mode in Modernity.....147

The Rehabilitation of Allegory……………………..……………………...151

Staging Self-Alienation (*Gestus* in Brecht and Kafka)……..……………..159

Chaplin’s *Gestus*.........................................................................................166

Theory of Distraction…………………………………..……………….171

The Mechanisation of the Body……………………………………..….180

Chapter 5. Mickey Mouse: Utopian and Barbarian………..………………………187

‘The Destructive Character’……………………………………..……...192

Collective Dream……………………..…………………………………200

Union with Technology…………………………..……………………..207

Mickey Mouse and the Commodity Form…………..…………………….212

Mickey Mouse’s Ambiguity………………………………………...…..218

Conclusion……………………………………………………..………………..225

Closing Remarks: The Politics of Benjamin’s Film Aesthetics…………...225

Future Lines of Enquiry…………………………………………………………228

Sound film……………………………………………………………………228

Montage and duration………………………………………………………...234

Digital technologies……………………………………………………….237

Bibliography…………………………………………………………………………….239

## Introduction

In the last forty-five years or so, it has become commonplace to quote Walter Benjamin in any scholarly approach to film, as if to do so were a badge of honour. With more or less rigour, different fields of study such as Cultural Studies, Film Studies and Modern Languages have adopted Benjamin as a point of reference in film analysis. His most famous essays, primarily 'On the Concept of History,' the third version of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (symptomatically referred to as 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' after the translation in *Illuminations*) and 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' are frequently cited in discussions of issues such as temporality, experience and mediation in film analysis. However, these approaches very often decontextualize some specific ideas from the whole of Benjamin's oeuvre. Furthermore, most of these scholars pay too little attention to his conception and articulation of film. My intention is to provide a framework for understanding Benjamin's theories on film in order to contextualise his ideas on cinema and thus do justice to his contribution to film studies. The aim of this thesis is to analyse Benjamin's writings on film in order to understand the philosophical and political project behind them. I will argue that the theories that Benjamin developed with regard to film are related to his latent concept of 'anthropological materialism' and especially to the way that technology shapes and changes the relation of human beings to the external world. Following this little-used and often-neglected concept, I will argue that Benjamin's writings on film are first and foremost concerned with the alternative reception of technology and the creation and organisation of a collective body (*Kollektivleib*).

Benjamin's writings on film are scattered among several short articles and notes. There is only one long essay—largely, if not entirely—devoted to film. This essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,' is indeed one of the most famous and widely debated texts of his theoretical corpus. Benjamin described it as a programmatic essay from the perspective of historical materialism

which was intended to establish a materialistic theory of art.[1] The aim, in relation to his *Arcades Project*, was to 'anchor the history of nineteenth-century art in the recognition of their situation as experienced by us in the present.'[2] Hence, the study intended to analyse the consequences for twentieth-century art of the arrival of technologies of reproduction. Benjamin introduces the essay as an analysis of this impact in its two main manifestations: namely, the reproduction of artworks and the art of film. Therefore, one of the major concerns of this essay was to study the new art form born from the technology of reproduction. Thus, the essay focuses first and foremost on the emergence of film and the consequent transformation of human perception. In this way, film appears as the central theme of this widely cited and discussed essay. Nevertheless, very few scholars have studied Benjamin's theories on film in depth. The emphasis on film as a medium in this essay has led many scholars, and rightly so, to apply Benjamin's theses to media studies in order to analyse the changing panorama of the means of reproduction.[3] However, Benjamin offers a reading of film and of specific film figures which opens up interesting directions in our understanding of, on the one hand, film aesthetics and, on the other, his broader concerns with regard to technology and the human body.

The most thorough study of Benjamin's writings on film published to date in English is the posthumous book by Miriam Hansen *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (2011). This book collects her work on these three authors over the course of her career, most of which was published previously in a number of highly relevant articles on the matter. The chapters devoted to Benjamin (chapters 3 to 7) are revised and reworked versions of previous articles which I will analyse below. *Cinema and Experience* can be conceived as the culmination of Hansen's work on Benjamin, which occupied the

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[1] Letter to Max Horkheimer, from 16 October 1935. Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin (1910-1940)*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.509.
[2] Letter to Gerhard Scholem, from 24 October 1935. Ibid., p.514.
[3] See, for example, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, eds., *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003); the special issue of the journal *Transformations* on 'Walter Benjamin and the Virtual: Politics, Art, and Mediation in the Age of Global Culture,' issue no. 15 (November 2007); the collection of essays by Benjamin on media *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008).

last twenty-five years of her life. The aim of the present work is, first and foremost, to present a coherent monograph of Benjamin on film. To this end, I develop some ideas that Hansen left open in her texts on Benjamin.[4] Nonetheless, this thesis attempts to offer a novel reading of Benjamin's writings on film by interpreting them through the optic of anthropological materialism. Hansen has already pointed out the relation between Benjamin's ideas on cinema reception and his materialist conception of the body. However, I want to read Benjamin's interest in different film figures, films and images through this concept in order to, first, stress the relevance of this concept to his thought and, secondly, to contribute to the existing field of scholarship on Benjamin and cinema with a more exhaustive analysis of this project.

* * *

The first wave of academic interest in Benjamin's work on film in the English-speaking world emerged in the 1970s, especially after the publication of *Illuminations* in 1969 and *Understanding Brecht* in 1973. At that time, Benjamin was referred to in the debates on film and politics around the journal *Screen* as a faithful companion to Brecht, as he could provide programmatic insights into the transformation and politicisation of the film form. The most cited texts in that period were 'The Author as Producer' and the 'Work of Art' essay. Nevertheless, throughout those years *Screen* also made its own contribution to the knowledge of Benjamin in the English-speaking world, especially in the juncture of media and politics, with the translation of essays such as 'Little History of Photography' in 1972 and 'Left Wing Melancholia' in 1974.[5] However, a more intensive interest in

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[4] See for example chapter four, in which I expand on an idea that Hansen surreptitiously placed in her book *Cinema and Experience* on the 'allegorical mode' that Benjamin conceived in Chaplin, but which she never developed.

[5] Some of the articles which cite Benjamin in the light of the debates on Brecht in the journal *Screen* are Christopher Williams's 'Politics and Production: Some Pointers through the Work of Jean-Luc Godard,' year 12, no.4 (1971), pp.6-24; Ben Brewster's 'From Shklovsky to Brecht: A Reply,' year 15, no.2 (1974), pp.82-102; Stephen Heath's 'Lessons from Brecht,' year 15, no.2 (1974), pp.103-128; and Colin MacCabe's 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses,' year 15, no.2 (1974), pp.7-27. Benjamin was also referred to in the contemporary debates about the avant-garde in articles such as Stanley Mitchell's 'Marinetti and Mayakovsky: Futurism, Fascism, Communism,' year 12, no.4

Benjamin's theories on film in the Anglo-American academic world was arguably prompted by the publication of a special issue on Weimar film theory by *New German Critique* in the winter of 1987. Miriam Hansen had become a member of the editorial board of this journal in 1984 and co-edited this number with David Bathrick and Thomas Elsaesser. It included essays from scholars such as Thomas Y. Levin, Gertrud Koch, Sabine Hake and Richard W. Allen on authors such as Kracauer, Bálázs, Benjamin, Adorno and Lukács. More importantly, Hansen published here the article 'Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology",' probably the first, serious attempt to produce a coherent understanding of Benjamin's theories of film.[6]

In this essay, Hansen analyses the 'Work of Art' essay in terms of the changes in experience and its mediation caused by the development of the technologies of reproduction. Thus, she discusses the 'incongruities' of the 'Work of Art' essay, such as the alleged polarity between aura and the masses, by situating these themes in connection with Benjamin's theses of experience. In this way, Hansen evaluates concepts such as aura, the 'optical unconscious' and the 'mimetic faculty' according to a complex temporality which can be deduced from Benjamin's own development of these concepts in other texts, something which was consistently overlooked by earlier commentators. It is noticeable in her approach that, at the time, Hansen was especially concerned with notions of spectatorship which had been brought into the debate by, on the one hand, psychoanalytical feminist film theory, especially the writings of Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane, and, on the other, the German film director Alexander Kluge and the theorist Oskar Negt.

For Hansen, Benjamin opened up the prospect of reading film, especially her long-time interest in early film and classical Hollywood cinema, 'as a training ground for the new types of sensory experiences created by industrial and urban modernity.'[7] This approach bridged her research interests in both American and German culture,

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(1971), pp.152-161; and Peter Wollen's 'Photography and Aesthetics,' year 19, no.4 (1978), pp.9-28, which largely reflects on Benjamin's essay on photography, published a few years earlier in the same journal.

[6] Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology"' in *New German Critique*, no. 40, special issue on Weimar Film Theory (Winter, 1987), pp. 179-224.

[7] Andreas Huyssen, 'Miriam Hansen and the Legacies of Critical Theory,' in *October*, no.137 (Summer, 2011), p.126.

modernism and mass culture and led her to develop new intellectual approaches to notions of spectatorship, a theme she had previously analysed in relation to the concept of the 'public sphere' (*Öffentlichkeit*) as developed by Kluge and Negt after the work of Jürgen Habermas. Her first important article on this topic, 'Early Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?,' published in 1983 also in *New German Critique*, examined whether there was a proletarian public sphere in cinema in Wilhelmine Germany in the same way as had been claimed in the United States.[8] The study did not aim to analyse the audience of cinemas in Imperial Germany as much as it sought to explore the ontological status of the concept of the 'public sphere' itself and its suitability in approaches to early cinema. When Hansen started to actively study Benjamin's (and by the same token Kracauer's and Adorno's) theories on film, she did so first and foremost as a continuation of her concern with notions of spectatorship and with her understanding of cinema as a 'vernacular modernism.'[9] Hence, with her reading of the Frankfurt School, Hansen provided a new understanding of critical theory which could have a particular currency (*Aktualität*) in contemporary debates on media and film studies.

The next relevant approach to the field came from Gertrud Koch, another scholar involved in the field of German early film theory and feminism and who, like Hansen, was a contributor to *New German Critique*. In 1992, she wrote the essay 'Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art" Essay.' Koch argues that there is no other essay by Benjamin to have provoked so many interpretations. She also qualifies the 'Work of Art' essay as 'the sole long and coherent text which the author wrote … on the subject of the new medium of the masses—film.'[10] In this article, she presents a reading of the essay influenced by

[8] Hansen, 'Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?' *New German Critique*, no. 29, *The Origins of Mass Culture: The Case of Imperial Germany (1871-1918)* (Spring-Summer, 1983), pp. 147-184.

[9] With this concept, Hansen attempts to analyse the modernist aesthetics of mass-produced and mass-consumed phenomena, ranging from the urban environment to the cinema. She uses the term 'vernacular' in order to avoid the 'ideologically overdetermined' adjective 'popular.' According to her, 'the term vernacular combines the dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity, and translatability.' Hansen, 'The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,' in *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 6, no. 2 (April 1999), p.60.

[10] Gertrud Koch, 'Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art' Essay' in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds., *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.205.

earlier texts concerning anthropology and, more markedly, in relation to the *Arcades Project* and the theses 'On the Concept of History.' Thus, Koch bestows a demiurge character upon the camera with a Messianic power to disclose and unveil reality. However, her focus remains on the 'optical unconscious' and the position of the apparatus in the relation between actor and audience and does not develop Benjamin's anthropological concerns regarding film technology in depth. This thesis will answer at least two questions that Koch's essay posed as early as 1992, but left open; namely, what is the relation between Benjamin's early texts on anthropology and his later writings on film and to what extent the different and scattered texts on film by Benjamin can be conceived of as a coherent theoretical project.

In the same year, an essay that was both more relevant to and highly influential upon the analysis of Benjamin's theories on film was published, Susan Buck-Morss' 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered.'[11] The most important achievement of this essay was to place Benjamin's writings on cinema (and technology in general) within the context of his concerns about the physicality of the human body and the senses—and therefore implicitly connecting Benjamin's writings on film to his anthropological materialism. Buck-Morss reread the widely discussed closing section of the 'Work of Art' essay and claimed that the new conception of aesthetics developed by Benjamin aimed to stimulate an alternative field of study to analyse and counteract the pernicious effects of modern technology upon the human body. She argued that Benjamin was asking art to restore the power of the senses and undo the alienation of human sensorium by passing through the new technologies. Thus, Buck-Morss claimed that, for Benjamin, film could be politically productive because it offers a particularly privileged way of cognising the world. However, she argued that film can also produce its own phantasmagorias, that is, technical manipulations of the senses, to show a corrupted appearance of reality. This point is particularly relevant when it comes to representing the whole social body articulated by technology (a crucial point in Benjamin's anthropological problem). I will return to this essay to discuss the effects of technology upon the human body and the role of cinema in producing an alternative reception and adaptation of technology.

[11] Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered' in *October*, vol. 62 (Autumn, 1992), pp.3-41.

It was through Buck-Morss that Hansen realised that Benjamin's writings on film were particularly related to his project of creating a collective innervation of technology. She articulated these ideas for the first time in her 1993 article 'Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney.'[12] Through the figure of Mickey Mouse and Disney cartoons in general, the essay analyses the position of Benjamin in the debates around the juncture of art, politics and technology. Thus, Hansen rightly situates Benjamin's writings on film, and more specifically on Mickey Mouse, at this particular crossroads. Adorno appears as a secondary voice in stressing the ambivalence of Benjamin on this topic. For Hansen, Disney films were interesting for critical theory because they catalysed discussions on the psycho-physical effects of mass culture. According to Benjamin, these films rehearsed an alternative organisation of technology and the human body. Ultimately, Hansen argues, Benjamin conceived the very technologies which contributed to the sensory alienation of human beings as capable of undoing this same alienation. At the same time, these technologies could produce a therapeutically-positive collective body (*Kollektivleib*) through a process of innervation in the cinema audience. This essay advances many of the points that I will address in the thesis. However, there are crucial differences at the point of contextualising this idea of the collective body within Benjamin's writings. The first chapter of this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive context for the anthropological-materialist themes that appear in his writings on film through a close reading of some key texts on anthropology and aesthetics.

The influence of Buck-Morss's essay on anaesthetics is even clearer on Hansen's 1999 article 'Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street.'[13] Here, Hansen acknowledges that Benjamin's writings on film are part of his anthropological-materialist concerns. Although Hansen does not develop the concept in this essay, she analyses, develops and complicates the term 'innervation' that Buck-Morss had already approached in her essay. Similarly to her, Hansen's aim in this essay was to reactivate Benjamin's argument about the possibility of undoing the alienation of the senses through the concept of 'innervation.' Hansen claims that with this term

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[12] Hansen, 'Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney,' in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92.1 (January, 1993), pp.27-61.

[13] Hansen, 'Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,' in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 2, *'Angelus Novus': Perspectives on Walter Benjamin* (Winter, 1999), pp. 306-343.

Benjamin is prefiguring an alternative reception of technology by the collective and that this reception takes place exemplarily in cinemas. Thus, she situates film within Benjamin's 'techno-utopian politics,' opening up the possibility of an alternative imbrication of technology and the human senses which countered the already failed reception of technology.[14] Drawing on Buck-Morss's argument while also pushing it forward, Hansen deepens the meanings of the concept of innervation in neurophysiology and in psychoanalysis to conclude that Benjamin—whether borrowing the term from one or the other—used 'innervation' as an antidote and counterconcept to the anaesthetising economy of a society technologically saturated by shocks.[15] As I said above, Hansen envisages in this essay the concept of 'anthropological materialism' by analysing the changing of the human *physis* according to history and the different political organisations of technology. Drawing also on Koch's essay, Hansen argues that, for Benjamin, the cinematographic camera, as a prosthetic extension of our perception, overcomes the physiological limitations of the human body. Thus, Hansen argues, Benjamin's politicisation of art is pursued in the collective innervation of technology—elsewhere equated with revolution—which mobilises and rechannels the otherwise destructive energies of technology. At this point, Hansen pairs the concepts 'mimetic faculty' and 'optical unconscious' with the term 'innervation' and argues that they facilitate a relation of subject to object through patterns of similitude and interplay, involving furthermore a sensuous, somatic and tactile form of perception. With this essay, Hansen took a huge step forward in locating Benjamin's writings on film within the same project as his anthropological materialism, concerned with the history of the human *physis*, particularly with the effects of technology upon the human body and the alternative ways of organising and incorporating technology in the social body.

In 'Room-for-Play: Walter Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema' (2004), Hansen remains interested in the concept of innervation and explores it in connection to the term *Spiel*, a concept which is crucial for Benjamin's alternative conception of aesthetics.[16] Hansen links the term *Spiel* with Benjamin's texts on children's toys and with his reflections on the figure of the gambler. By focusing on the latter,

[14] Ibid., p.313.
[15] Ibid., p.317.
[16] Hansen, 'Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema' in *October*, vol. 109 (Summer, 2004), pp.3-45.

Hansen is able to stress in this figure a ‘bodily presence of mind’ to the detriment of a perception based primarily on the sense of sight. She connects this ‘bodily presence of mind’ in the gambler with the concept of aesthetics that Benjamin formulated with regard to the different relationship between observer and artwork in cinema reception. Following the argument presented in her previous essay, Hansen connects Benjamin’s interest in play as a new logic with which to conceive the role of film as helping to constitute a collective body. This new *physis* would appropriate and incorporate technology and would become both subject and object in the interaction between nature and humanity demanded by Benjamin. Hansen inserts, therefore, the logic of play opened up by film into the project of anthropological materialism. According to Hansen, Benjamin, beginning with *One-Way Street*, sought to theorise the reconfiguration of physical space in urban modernity (with the appearance of new media such as film and advertising) and how this reconfiguration affected the space of the body in relation to the space of images. Thus, Benjamin addresses the revolutionary potential of this reconfiguration in anthropological-materialist terms, as the possibility of establishing, through a regime of play, a new relationship between humanity and nature through technology.

More recently, in 2008, Hansen wrote the article ‘Benjamin’s Aura.’ Although this article focuses on the concept of ‘aura,’ it offers an original understanding of Benjamin’s theories on film through this long-debated and elusive concept. Hansen claims that aura’s epistemic structure appears reconceptualised and secularised in other concepts, such as ‘profane illumination,’ ‘*flânerie*,’ ‘mimetic faculty,’ and ‘optical unconscious.’ She argues that there are at least three meanings of aura in Benjamin’s oeuvre and, therefore, it cannot be understood only as an aesthetic category—despite the fact that Benjamin, under the influence of Adorno, ultimately used the term in this sense. Although the destruction of aura in film is evident, Hansen wonders whether ‘there are ways of translating aura’s defining moments of disjunctive temporality and self-dislocating reflexivity into a potential for the *collective,* as the structural subject of cinema.’[17] Hansen suggests that Benjamin was able to find salient features of auratic experience in films, such as a temporal disjunction within the film language and the shock-like confrontation with an alien

[17] Hansen, ‘Benjamin’s Aura’ in *Critical Inquiry,* no. 34 (Winter, 2008), p.349. Italics in the original.

self. In the ‘optical unconscious,’ Benjamin recognised the possibility of a return of the gaze of objects that Hansen associates with the cabbalistic concept of ‘tselem.’ For Hansen, in short, film was a tool to recover or, at least, supply an experience in the age of technological reproducibility.

Since the publication of Hansen’s first article on Benjamin and film in the *New German Critique*, many other texts have appeared which deal directly or indirectly with this subject (generally on specific points such as the ‘optical unconscious,’ the ‘reception in distraction,’ ‘aura,’ etc.), which this thesis will discuss in due course. Benjamin’s theories on film have also been used to address some questions beyond his own writings. In this regard, I want to stress the relevance of Esther Leslie’s book *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (2002). This book is an analysis of early animation film from the perspective of the debates of intellectuals and artists of the time. Benjamin becomes a central figure and his presence hovers over the whole book. Furthermore, Leslie provides one of the most valuable readings of Mickey Mouse, one of the figures analysed in this thesis.

However, this thesis does not only deal with Benjamin’s writings on film, but also with his concerns with technology under the project of anthropological materialism. For this purpose, Leslie’s monograph *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (2000) has also been highly influential in addressing Benjamin’s theories of technology. I would also like to stress the proximity of my approach to that of Uwe Steiner. Although not addressing film directly, he presupposed the connection between Benjamin’s political project around the physicality of the body and his writings on film. In his essay on the political in Benjamin, Steiner argued that the specific conditions of the film medium led Benjamin to perceive the creation of a collective body. In this way, the interaction of human beings with technology in that space appears as a rehearsal for a revolution that pursues the innervation of the technological organs of the collective. ‘What is merely practiced in the cinema,’ says Steiner, ‘exists for real in the revolution,’ when the collective attempts to gain

mastery over the new techno-body.[18] In this thesis, I will return often to this idea of cinema as a training ground for technological innervation in the collective.

Finally, I want to stress the relevance of the publication in 2010 of a special issue of the journal *Grey Room* entitled 'Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art.' This special issue provides the first translation into English of the initial version of the 'Work of Art' essay in order to reclaim the importance of the term *taktisch*, which is more clearly expressed in the earliest version than in the later ones. In the article 'Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses,' Tobias Wilke analyses the film medium according to the corporeality of the audience and the change in the sensorium caused by the introduction of new technologies. He argues that Benjamin's definition of 'medium' covers a wider sense than the usual understanding of the concept as technological means of reproduction. For Benjamin, writes Wilke, 'medium names the comprehensive force field that links human sensorium to world and that is constituted in doing so by the interplay between natural (physiological, physical) and historical (social, technological, and aesthetic) factors.'[19] Thus, the 'Work of Art' essay analyses a shift—produced by the arrival of technological means such as photography and film—that reformulates the physiology of perception and the physical coordinates of sensory experience. As I will try to argue in this thesis, this move led Benjamin to redefine art through the literalised meaning of the Greek concept *aisthēsis*, turning the realm of aesthetics 'into a training ground for sensory capacities.'[20] Wilke analyses Benjamin's new conception of aesthetics in relation to film through the term *taktisch*, a concept that Benjamin used to characterise the transformation of sensory perception in cinemas, and links it with the project of the avant-garde.[21] This text has contributed to this field of research with one of the most thorough understandings of the 'politics of the

[18] Uwe Steiner, 'The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political,' trans. by Colin Sample, *New German Critique*, no. 83, Special Issue on Walter Benjamin (Spring-Summer, 2001), pp.84, 85.
[19] Tobias Wilke, 'Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses,' in Michael W. Jennings and Tobias Wilke, eds., *Grey Room* 39, Special Issue *Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art* (Spring, 2010), p.40.
[20] Ibid., p.41.
[21] I will return to the concept '*taktisch*,' which Benjamin borrowed from the art historian Aloïs Riegl, in the first chapter, where I discuss the reformulation of aesthetics as *aisthēsis.*

senses' in Benjamin. Furthermore, it helped me to perceive the role of film within his new reconceptualisation of aesthetics.

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I will define Benjamin's writings on film as 'film aesthetics.' He never described his writings on film as a project nor did he try to systematically write a film theory. Therefore, he never felt compelled to adopt a term to refer to such a project. However, his writings on film focused primarily on the shift that film technology had produced in aesthetics and, more specifically, in aesthetic experience. For this reason, I will argue that his writings on film can be compressed under the heading of 'film aesthetics.' Unlike Benjamin, Adorno referred to his reflections on film as questions of film aesthetics. For him, the aesthetics of film is 'inherently concerned with society.' For this reason, Adorno argues that film aesthetics, even if it focuses purely on its technological nature, must include a sociology of cinema.[22] It is no accident that Benjamin's film aesthetics, which departs from questions regarding film technology, develops a theory particularly focused on issues of reception and spectatorship. Thomas Elsaesser maintains that Benjamin's writings on film offer a theory of cinema, rather than a film theory, because his arguments about the discontinuity of the film process and its subject-effects concern both aesthetic and historical considerations.[23] Nonetheless, I would like to claim, via Adorno, that Benjamin's writings on film can be considered 'film aesthetics' precisely because, apart from the formal and stylistic observations of specific films, they respond primarily to the historical and technological foundations of the medium, on which the new aesthetics of film is based. Thus, I will argue that Benjamin's writings on cinema can be considered to have developed a different conception of aesthetics; one that focuses on the historical transformation of the relationship between observer and artwork. Thus, Benjamin attempts to locate this new art form historically, in the

[22] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Transparencies on Film,' trans. by Thomas Y. Levin, in *New German Critique*, no.24/25, special double issue on New German Cinema (Autumn, 1981 - Winter, 1982), p.202.
[23] Thomas Elsaesser, 'Cinema: The Irresponsible Signifier or "The Gamble with History": Film Theory or Cinema Theory" in *New German Critique*, no. 40, Op. cit., pp. 65-89.

transformation of our aesthetic perception. For this purpose, he analyses the changes that film has caused in traditional aesthetics through concepts such as play, derived from the aesthetic philosophy of Friedrich Schiller, and semblance, a term that he associates with Goethe. Furthermore, Benjamin revolutionises the study of aesthetics by understanding the term in its radical meaning, that is, as the perception of the senses. The first chapter will deal with these changes on aesthetics caused by the arrival of the technologies of reproduction and, especially, film. Through the term 'film aesthetics,' however, I also want to emphasise that Benjamin was not only concerned with issues related to the medium, but also with matters of representation, both in terms of content and form, which were fundamental to the new reconfiguration of space that film had brought about.

A methodological problem that I have to face in the thesis is the relationship I set up with the films mentioned by Benjamin. When one attempts to write an account of Benjamin's view of films, it should be borne in mind that Benjamin was not a regular moviegoer, as was for example his friend Kracauer. From the writings and notes he left, one can deduce that he saw very few films—in contrast to the high number of books he read.[24] Indeed, one could even argue that he did not see some of the films he mentions in his texts. In some passages, he refers to films such as *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* (dir. Fred Niblo, 1925) or *Cleopatra* (dir. Cecil B. Demille, 1934), without giving further details about them. Sometimes, he focuses on texts that allude to some specific films, but one remains suspicious of whether he ever saw the film—for example, in his analysis of Asta Nielsen's performance in *Irrende Seelen* (dir. Carl Froelich, 1921) and of the casting made by Carl Theodor Dreyer for *Jeanne d'Arc* (1928). At times, however, Benjamin refers to film adaptations of books and evaluates them. This is the case with Norman McLeod's 1933 version of *Alice in Wonderland*, a film that he saw after reading the book by Lewis Carroll and described as 'an extraordinary affair,'[25] and John Ford's *Lost Patrol* (1934), which Benjamin judges as 'not entirely unworthy' of the book on which it was based,

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[24] Benjamin kept a list of the books that he read since he graduated from the gymnasium. In 1925, this list had already reached 1,000 books, as he told his friend Gerhard Scholem. Letter from *c*.20 to 25 May 1925, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p.268.

[25] *Gretel Adorno and Walter Benjamin: Correspondence 1930-1940*, ed. by Henri Lonitz and Christoph Gödde, trans. by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p.176.

*Death in the Desert* by Philip Macdonald.[26] In general, very few films appear within the bulk of his writings. The only films that he analysed—more or less in depth—in published texts were Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (in 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' 1927), Vertov's *The Soviet Sixth of the Earth* (in 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film,' 1927) and Chaplin's *The Circus* (in the review 'Chaplin in Retrospect,' 1928). In short, Benjamin never offered a close reading of the films he used as examples of broader ideas. For this reason, any analysis of Benjamin's writings on film always faces the difficulty of anchoring his arguments in the film image. Thus, I had to develop a method of analysis that stemmed from Benjamin's own comments (often general and vague). From here, I went forth into the images that I intuitively thought he was referring to and, eventually, back to Benjamin's theory to draw some conclusions. Thus, in this thesis, apart from the more obvious work of textual analysis and interpretation, there is an underground endeavour of research in order to figure out the actual films that influenced Benjamin in his texts.

Within the field of scholarship on Benjamin, there has always been an intense debate about the periodisation of his thought. In general trends, there is, on the one hand, a current of scholarship which splits off the early 'theological' Benjamin and the late 'Marxist' one; and, on the other, another tendency that considers his work as a homogenous whole with no crises and critical junctures. A third way defended by Michael Löwy argues that, in order to understand the complexity of Benjamin's thought, it is necessary to 'take account simultaneously of the continuity of certain essential themes and the various breaks and turning points that mark his intellectual and political trajectory.'[27] The turn to Marxism in Benjamin's career arguably incorporated previous theoretical concerns. Thus, my position stands between the second and third trends. In this way, I would like to argue that some preoccupations prior to the 'communist signals from Capri' were, under this new paradigm, formulated under different guises, while still forming part of the same project. In this thesis I will track the concept of 'anthropological materialism' back to the anthropological texts of the late 1910s and early 1920s. I will suggest that this

[26] Letter to Kitty Marx-Steinschneider, from 15 April 1936. *The Complete Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p.526. In most cases Benjamin does not mention the title of the film and still less the name of the director.
[27] Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2005), pp.4,5.

concept is surreptitiously present in all of Benjamin's oeuvre, but that it acquires different formulations during different periods of his life. Benjamin's first texts on film date from 1927. Yet I will argue that they are part of a project which started years before and, arguably, continued until his last text. This is not to claim that this project did not experience an important upheaval in the late 1920s when he started to approach cultural expressions such as cinema, advertising, avant-garde art, etc., from the perspective of Marxism. Precisely, these first texts on film should be situated within his Parisian cycle, which started with *One-Way Street* and was to come to an end with the *Arcades Project*. In this cycle, the profane motifs that Benjamin inaugurated in *One-Way Street* may be argued to have intensified in essays such as 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), but also in the texts on Soviet film. However, Benjamin continuously returns to important themes of the German cycle which are never abandoned—the texts on Chaplin, which I address as a rehabilitation of allegory, are proof of this. This thesis, therefore, will attempt to situate his writings on film within the continuing projects and fractures of his career. My approach to Benjamin is from a Marxist perspective and, therefore, I will lean towards his Marxist themes more often than towards others. Nonetheless, I do believe that Benjamin's Marxism is a particular one and cannot be understood without also taking into account his theological concerns and his anarchistic attitude towards politics, among many other individual circumstances. Therefore, these different trends must be considered together and the extent to which they overlap with each other and how, in certain periods, one is prioritised above the rest, should be assessed.

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This thesis aims to present a comprehensive analysis of Benjamin's writings on film by contextualising them within broader philosophical and political projects. These writings appeared scattered among many articles, essays and notes and they may look at first sight to be nothing but a fragmentary collection of thoughts on different figures and subjects, offering sometimes contradictory statements about the film apparatus. I will seek to contextualise Benjamin's writings on film within a

continuing project in his career which touches upon many other subjects apart from film. My intention is to encompass the short texts on film—on Soviet film, Charlie Chaplin and Mickey Mouse—and the 'Work of Art' essay in order to show that, despite the apparent lack of connection between them, they contain a similar concern and interest that reflected a broader preoccupation. The short texts that Benjamin wrote on film have often been discarded for apparently failing to provide a clear appreciation of his film aesthetics, but a closer analysis will reveal that they must be understood in a specific, shared context and in relation to other ongoing theoretical concerns. For example, Gertrud Koch claimed that the 'Work of Art' essay was the only coherent text that Benjamin wrote on film. I want to show here that, while the other texts devoted entirely or partially to film may seem incoherent and fragmentary, they form part of a same project; a project which, in turn, belongs to the broader project of anthropological materialism.

Some scholars have previously pointed to the connection between Benjamin's writings on film and the concept of 'anthropological materialism' that he envisaged in the 1929 essay on Surrealism. For example, as I have stated, Miriam Hansen considered Benjamin's writings on film in the tradition of anthropological materialism in her essay 'Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street' (1999) and more systematically in 'Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema' (2004). Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen have also analysed this term and noticed the connection to Benjamin's writings on film, especially with regard to Mickey Mouse—even though they did not enter into a discussion of the role of anthropological materialism in Benjamin's film and media theories.[28] Esther Leslie has also paid attention to Benjamin's particular materialism through this literalised meaning and his conception of 'technoid bodies.'[29] Nevertheless, the concept has not been given the prominence that it deserves. However, in recent years, the concept has received renewed interest from a group of young scholars who have grouped themselves precisely under the umbrella of this term. The work of Marc Berdet, Sami Khatib and Jan Sieber, among others, has thus developed under the guidance of

[28] See Norbert Bolz and Willem Van Reijen, *Walter Benjamin*, trans. by Laimdota Mazzarins (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), chapter 6 'Anthropological Materialism,' pp.55-69, and chapter 7 'Media Aesthetics,' pp.71-77.
[29] See chapter 1 of Leslie's PhD thesis: 'Technoid Bodies and *Technik*,' '*Overpowering Conformism*'*: Technique and Technology in Walter Benjamin's Writings from 1925 to 1940* (doctoral thesis, Sussex University, 1994), pp.28-61.

this concept, which, as Berdet argues, is not only a category and a tradition, but also a sensibility and an actuality.[30] I would like to claim that my work also takes part in this project of restoring and rehabilitating this important concept.

However, to present the theories on film developed by Benjamin within his project of anthropological materialism will not be the only aim of this thesis. It can be argued that this approach has already been established by Miriam Hansen. My aim is, first of all, to contextualise Benjamin's writings on film within his efforts to theorise the effects and countereffects of technology and art upon the human body, following his anthropological-materialist project. Nonetheless, to this end I will have to base the project of anthropological materialism, and more specifically Benjamin's interest in *aisthēsis*, on firm ground—a job that in my opinion remains to be done. I will also set up a methodology that will enable me to address Benjamin's writings on film and give them a comprehensive understanding. For this purpose, I will develop a close reading of his texts on film and will create connections between these writings and other texts that inform his theoretical preoccupations. This point is important for my methodological approach, for I will read those texts that deal with cinema closely, but I will not do so by establishing a provisional isolation. On the contrary, I will try to derive the meaning of these texts by connecting and comparing his preoccupations with specific themes in different texts and periods. In this way, I will assess the similarities and turning points that informed his views and critical junctures on some topics. Thus, I will be able, on the one hand, to read Benjamin's interest in certain films, images and directors more closely, and on the other, to present an exhaustive theoretical contextualisation of Benjamin's project. I will also introduce and discuss some of the most relevant texts in the secondary literature on Benjamin in order to both understand it better and shed new light on the field. My aim is to provide a new and—hopefully—more comprehensive reading of Benjamin's engagement with film. It is also my intention to offer a new perspective from which to read and to look at Benjamin. His writings on film are certainly secondary in his oeuvre. However, by linking these writings to other ongoing theoretical questions, I hope to contribute not

[30] 'Anthropological Materialism' is a project launched by an international and multidisciplinary research network which seeks to promote new analyses of the world actuality through the lens of this hitherto neglected paradigm. See Marc Berdet, 'Seven Short Temporary Statements on Anthropological Materialism,' in *Anthropological Materialism: From Walter Benjamin, and Beyond* http://anthropologicalmaterialism.hypotheses.org/822 [last accessed on 11 June 2014]

only to the existing field on Benjamin and film, but also more broadly to the general scholarship on Benjamin.

As stated above, the thesis will aim both to contextualise the writings on film within a broader theoretical project and to read in detail Benjamin's engagement with some particular film figures. To that end, I will present, first, an analysis of Benjamin's project with regard to film through the concept of 'anthropological materialism' and his reconfiguration of aesthetics. Secondly, I will explore that project through detailed analyses of his approaches to specific national cinemas and film figures in individual chapters. These particular approaches will be, in turn, contextualised within specific periods of Benjamin's career and will be assessed along with other themes that informed his preoccupations at the time.

In the first chapter, I will contextualise the new conception of aesthetics that Benjamin developed according to the new changes in art brought about by the emergence of cinema in the anthropological-materialist project. Thus, I will trace the concept 'anthropological materialism' from some early texts concerned with the body, such as 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem' (1922), through *One-Way Street* and the 'Surrealism' essay (in which Benjamin defines the concept for the first time), to the 'Work of Art' essay. I will pay special attention to Benjamin's definition of 'first' and 'second nature' and the shift to the brand-new 'first' and 'second technology.' Through these terms, I will analyse the impact of technology upon the human body and the changes in the senses caused by the arrival of film. I will also introduce in this chapter the concept of 'innervation,' by which Benjamin meant an empowering incorporation of technology into a collective body. I will argue that technology, by changing the human sensorium, has also transformed the relationship between observer and artwork, subject and object. This transformation will be considered, on the one hand, through the concept of the 'optical unconscious' and, on the other, through the reformulation of the realm of aesthetics as *aisthēsis*, which Benjamin developed in the 'Work of Art' essay.

The second chapter will focus on Benjamin's writings on Soviet film. In this chapter I will analyse the two articles that he wrote on this topic in 1927 after his stay in Moscow. I will try to understand these early texts on film in connection with other later texts such as 'The Author as Producer' and the 'Work of Art' essay. I will argue

that these two articles anticipate many themes which are more thoroughly developed in subsequent texts concerned with film and the politicisation of art. This chapter will also discuss and contextualise Benjamin's position on technology in the Marxist debates around the topic. His insights about technology in the texts on the Soviet Union allow me to critically address technology in relation to the state of affairs of the country. I will also address the question of Benjamin's peculiar call for the politicisation of art with regard to the different political groupings in the Soviet art scene and I will assess his position in these debates, and his attitude towards Soviet politics in general.

The third chapter deals with German cinema. Although Benjamin did not talk very much about German films, I will try to answer some important questions that arise from his texts on technology and, more specifically, on technological reproduction. Benjamin discerned a failed reception of technology in Germany after the First World War. I will analyse the consequences of such a ruinous adoption of technology through his polemics with Ernst Jünger and will assess to what extent this bungled reception had an impact on German cinema. Drawing the theoretical framework from Benjamin's remarks on the masses, I will analyse the film *Metropolis* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1927) as an example of the 'architectonical quality' that Benjamin detected in UFA productions during the Weimar Republic. I will also analyse the films by Leni Riefenstahl as an illustration of the corrupted representation of the masses performed by National Socialism. Finally, I will interpret the aesthetisation of politics promoted by fascism from the point of view of Benjamin's reconfiguration of aesthetics and the relationship between human nature and technology.

The fourth chapter analyses Charlie Chaplin in the context of a project to rehabilitate allegory in the twentieth century. Chaplin will be evaluated in connection with the two other figures who form part of this same project, Kafka and Brecht. Benjamin approached all of these figures through the same concept, *Gestus*. In fact, there are many connections among these three figures and this chapter attempts to analyse them as part of the possibility of representing the alienating experience of modernity in a technologically-saturated society. Benjamin discerned in film the prospect of undoing the numbing of the senses, which had become deadened as a consequence of the shock experience of modern life. Chaplin will be analysed in this chapter as a

paradigmatic cinematic figure to counteract the alienation of human beings in modernity through his *gestic* and allegorical performance. I will argue that, for Benjamin, Chaplin was able to mimic the fragmentary experience of modern human beings through the very structure of the film medium, exploiting the 'productive use of the human being's self-alienation' that Benjamin assigned film. Brecht and Kafka will provide clues to better understand the qualities that Benjamin so much appreciated in Chaplin.

The fifth and last chapter is on Mickey Mouse. I will address this figure as a programmatic companion for Benjamin in his critique of humanism in the period of the 'destructive character.' I will argue that this project is inherently associated with the anthropological-materialist program of technological innervation in cinema. Benjamin, in fact, demands that this process of collective technological innervation must be carried out by the *Unmensch* or the barbarian, of which Mickey Mouse is an exemplary exponent. For this reason, the passages on Mickey Mouse envisaged by Benjamin will be read in connection with texts such as 'The Destructive Character,' 'Karl Kraus' and 'Experience and Poverty.' Mickey Mouse appears, thus, as an example of the new, positive concept of barbarism that Benjamin develops in a period impoverished of experience and culture in general. Far from lamenting this loss, Benjamin will take up Mickey Mouse—not greatly removed from the creatures of Paul Scheerbart and J. J. Grandville—as a model for the incorporation of technology into the first nature of the human body.

Finally, in the conclusion, I will evaluate to what extent Benjamin's film aesthetics are suitable for analysing other films apart from those considered in this thesis. To that end, I will explore his position towards sound film in general and his commentaries on certain sound films in particular. I will also suggest some guidelines which might be followed in any further attempt to apply Benjamin's film aesthetics to more contemporary trends in film.

## Chapter 1

## Walter Benjamin's Film Aesthetics in the Light of Anthropological Materialism

The aim of this chapter is to frame Benjamin's writings on film within his broader concerns with the human body. I will argue that the concept of aesthetics that he reformulated in the 'Work of Art' essay, understood as sense perception, is intimately connected to the anthropological-materialist project. My intention is to ground this recuperation of the Greek term *aisthēsis* in Benjamin's early anthropological texts and follow the genealogy of his idea of the creation of a collective body (*Kollektivleib*) *in* and *through* technology. In this way, I will assess his thoughts with regard to the role of technology and, more specifically, technologically-reproducible art in the transformation of the human sensorium. With this approach, I attempt to fill a gap in previous approaches to Benjamin's writings on film. For even those scholars who have paid attention to the connection between these writings and Benjamin's anthropological materialism, such as Miriam Hansen and Tobias Wilke, have not analysed the basis of this concept in depth. For this reason, Benjamin's early anthropological texts will provide the point of departure of my analysis. Then, I will address concepts such as 'second nature,' 'optical unconscious' and 'second technology' from the standpoint of anthropological materialism and the reconfiguration of the spatial coordinates between subject and object in the new aesthetics brought about by film. The description and analysis of Benjamin's early anthropological concerns will serve as a basis from which to examine the application of anthropological materialism in his formulation of film aesthetics.

Benjamin did not use the term 'anthropological materialism' consistently throughout his texts nor did he provide any solid definition. The concept appeared for the first time in Benjamin's 1929 essay on surrealism and later in some convolutes of his unfinished *Arcades Project*. In the 'Surrealism' essay, Benjamin defined the concept, in opposition to the metaphysical materialism of Nikolai Bukharin, as a mixture of

political materialism and 'physical creatureliness.'[1] In other words, anthropological materialism would situate itself in the intersection where dialectical materialism finds the physicality of the body, be it individual or collective. Benjamin suggests that the tradition of his anthropological materialism should be traced back, on the one hand, to a French school which comprises the poet Arthur Rimbaud and the socialist utopian thinkers Charles Fourier and Saint Simon—whose focus of interest was the human collective—and, on the other, to a Germanic current of thought which comprises authors such as Johann Peter Hebel, Jean Paul, Georg Büchner, Karl Gutzkow, Gottfried Keller and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who instead put the individual at the core of their interest.[2]

Nonetheless, as noted above, Benjamin never defined the term. Paradoxically, the best definition can be drawn from Adorno's critique of the concept. In a letter dated 6th September 1936, Adorno wrote to Benjamin:

> For all those points in which, despite our most fundamental and concrete agreement in other matters, I differ from you could be summed up and characterized as an *anthropological materialism* that I cannot accept. It is as if for you the human body represents the measure of all concreteness.[3]

Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen argue that the central element of Benjamin's anthropological materialism is precisely this bodily concretion that Adorno negatively described in this letter. With this concept Benjamin attempted to escape

[1] Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.2, part 1, 1927-1930 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.217.
[2] Ibid. and *Arcades Project*, convolute [W8, 1], ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 1999), p.633. The romantic writer Jean Paul, the dramatist Georg Büchner, the writer Karl Gutzkow, the Swiss realist writer Gottfried Keller and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche are all present in the sequence of letters 'German Men and Women.' These writers appear constantly in the writings of Benjamin. More specifically, Benjamin wrote an article on Keller for *Die literarische Welt* in 1927. Benjamin might have found in Nietzsche a decisive impulse for his peculiar metaphysics of the body. However, Benjamin does not define politics as an enhanced humanness, as in the case of Nietzsche's super-man, but rather in opposition to him. The collective body of mankind is not precisely a higher body to come, but the body of a humanity which has mirrored itself in the image of the *Unmensch*. See chapter 5, on Mickey Mouse, for a further development of this comparison.
[3] Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence (1928-1940)*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p.146. Italics in the original.

from certain metaphysical trends in orthodox Marxism, represented among others by the philosophy of Georgi Plekhanov and Bukharin. Although Adorno argued that Benjamin was developing 'an undialectical ontology of the body,' one should keep in mind, as Bolz and van Reijen suggest, that 'Benjamin's anthropological materialism does not refer ahistorically to the individual human body but to the collective human body that has become historical.'[4] Since 1922 Benjamin had been developing a theory about the creation of a collective body (*Kollektivleib*) in the reception of modern technology and organised in the profane realm of history. An examination of these texts, in which Benjamin talked systematically about this collective body organised in technology, especially 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem' and *One-Way Street*, will help to understand Benjamin's sometimes cryptic statements about anthropological materialism in the 'Surrealism' essay and the role that this concept plays in his theories on film.

Benjamin first introduced these discussions about the body in a text written in 1922 or 1923, 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem.' In this text, Benjamin adopts the reflections made by Paul Häberlin about the perception of body and soul, in which he claims that there is no difference between mental forms of comportment and bodily appearance.[5] Thus, Benjamin took up from Häberlin the difference between *Leib* (body) and *Körper* (body, corporeal substance). For Benjamin, *Leib* and *Körper* place the human being in different universal contexts. *Leib* is '[e]verything that a human being can distinguish in himself as having his form as a totality, as well as such of his limbs and organs that appear to have a form.'[6] The limitations which human beings perceive sensuously in themselves are also part of their body. The perception of the corporeal substance (*Körper*), on the contrary, is sensed through pain or pleasure and, therefore, claims Benjamin, no form or limitation is perceived. To sum up, body (*Leib*) is always related to the form of the body and the role of the

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[4] Norbert Bolz and Willem Van Reijen, *Walter Benjamin*, trans. by Laimdota Mazzarins (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), pp.55, 56.

[5] See Uwe Steiner, 'The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political,' trans. by Colin Sample, *New German Critique*, No. 83, special issue on Walter Benjamin (Spring - Summer, 2001), pp.55-58. For a more detailed account of the influence of Häberlin on Benjamin see Steiner, 'Von Bern nach Muri. Vier unveröffentlichte Briefe Walter Benjamins an Paul Häberlin im Kontext,' in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, no.75 (2001), pp.463-490.

[6] 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.394.

senses is to place such a body in relation to the external; whereas corporeal substance (*Körper*) does not take a concrete form. For that reason, Benjamin says that whereas with *Körper* humans belong to God, with *Leib* they belong to mankind. Thus, Benjamin argues, through his/her body (*Leib*) an individual presents him-/herself historically and thereby expands his/her body to humankind.

Uwe Steiner, in his article 'The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political,' argues that the psychophysical problem is the anthropological starting point of Benjamin's politics. Thus, through the concept of the body, Benjamin is able to transcribe individual experiences to the collective.[7] For Benjamin, humanity, as embodied in an individual, is both the annihilation and consummation of bodily life. It is annihilation because, through the historical existence of a body, which is transient, bodily life reaches its end. At the same time, however, through the totality of all its living members, humankind can incorporate nature—the nonliving, plants and animals—into the life of this body of mankind. Benjamin argues (in one of his first and most important statements about the relation between technology, nature and humanity) that humankind can create such a collective body, with the incorporation of the other elements of nature, 'by virtue of the technology in which the unity of its life is formed.'[8] At this point, it is worth clarifying that Benjamin always uses the word *Technik*, which means both technique and technology, instead of *Technologie*. *Technik* covers both the material hardware of machines and the social and political relations derived from them.[9] Drawing on this conception of *Technik*, Benjamin argues that everything that completes humanity's happiness should be considered as part of this bodily life, as its organs. In this way, Benjamin claims that the struggle for happiness is not an individual task, but rather the task of the individual as part of humanity. The consummation of the *Leib* should be thus understood as the epitome of happiness in bodily life, be it individual or collective. Nonetheless, any form of consummation carries with it a form of annihilation because of the mortality of the body. Steiner says that technology, in this text,

[7] Steiner, p.81.
[8] 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,' SW1, p.395.
[9] For a more detailed discussion of the term *Technik*, see Esther Leslie's preface to her *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto, 2000), especially pages xi and xii. Unlike Leslie, in this thesis I will use only the English word 'technology' to facilitate the reading. However, the reader should bear in mind that, every time I speak about technology in Benjamin, I am referring to the term *Technik* with all its connotations.

functions as a means to an end, that is, the happiness of bodily life. Thus, he compares this pursuit of happiness with the 'Theological-Political Fragment,' in which Benjamin wrote that 'The secular order should be erected on the idea of happiness.'[10] There, Benjamin understood politics as belonging to the profane order and, as such, happiness as its telos, its political goal, which must be sought in history.[11] In the text on the psychophysical problem, technology appears as a means to that end and, therefore, argues Steiner, it should be placed at the centre of Benjamin's reflections on politics.[12] It is, then, in 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem' that Benjamin starts to develop his political-philosophical concern for 'the interaction between the subject of politics—conceived of as a collective—and technology,' which takes place, Steiner indicates, within the order of the profane.[13] Benjamin's writings on technology—and more specifically on film—are set, then, in the order of the profane and, as such, happiness appears as its political goal. For this reason, Benjamin claims in 'Theories of German Fascism' (1930) that technology is 'a key to happiness.'[14]

Benjamin develops this interaction between technology and the collective, and the ultimate creation of a collective body (*Kollektivleib*), in greater depth in his book *One-Way Street*—more specifically in the last section 'To the Planetarium,' in which he reflects on the reception of modern technology by human collectives.[15] There, Benjamin defines the role of technology as the mastery of the relation between human beings and nature. This understanding stands against the widespread, imperialist-capitalist conception of technology as the mastery of nature by man. Benjamin illustrates this idea with the image of a cane wielder who proclaims that the purpose of education is the mastery of children by adults. For Benjamin, by

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[10] 'Theological-Political Fragment,' *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings,* vol. 3, 1935-1938 (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.305.

[11] In his portrait of Benjamin, Adorno recognised that the desire for happiness that Benjamin had defined as the basic motif of Marcel Proust was also the main quality of his thought. Thus, Adorno argued that for Benjamin the promise of happiness, which was usually reserved for art, could be fulfilled within the site of knowledge. Theodor W. Adorno, 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,' in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), p.230.

[12] Steiner, p.52.

[13] Ibid., pp.74, 75.

[14] 'Theories of German Fascism,' SW2, p.321. I will return to this text in chapter 3, on German film, in order to understand the reception of technology in Germany.

[15] 'To the Planetarium,' pp.486, 487, in 'One-Way Street,' SW1.

contrast, education should be the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and, therefore, the mastery should be over this relationship and not of one generation over the other. Hence, technology should be understood in similar terms: as the mastery of the relation between humanity and nature. This relation should turn to one of interplay, instead of remaining—as imperialists teach—one of human mastery over nature and other human beings. Benjamin argues that the ruling class has followed this conception and, because of its lust for profit, has thus betrayed the positive potential of technology. In one of the first formulations of his concept of 'anthropological materialism' and resuming the theory introduced in 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,' Benjamin claims that technology is organising a new *physis*, or collective body for mankind, different to previous configurations of humanity, based primarily on great organic life complexes such as families and nations. While humans as a species completed their development thousands of years ago, Benjamin thinks that the 'species mankind' is in its initial stages and has to adapt to the new nature. Benjamin thus returns to his argument about the creation of a collective body in technology. This collective body would not only incorporate what we usually call 'nature,' but also 'second nature,' which would ultimately become humanity's own nature.[16]

Benjamin conceives the creation of this collective body as a sexual intercourse between human beings and the cosmos. According to him, the greatest distinction between the ancient and the modern man is that the former's absorption in a cosmic experience was scarcely known to later periods. Thus, the astronomers of the modern age placed emphasis only on the optical connection to the universe. For Benjamin, the ecstatic trance (*Rausch*) through which ancient peoples had intercourse with the cosmos was brought about by an experience in which the knowledge of near and remote places became interpenetrated by one another. Years later, in his 1933 essay 'On the Mimetic Faculty,' Benjamin analysed this human gift for producing similarities. For Benjamin, ancient people were able to draw magical correspondences and analogies in the cosmos and could thus imitate the sky through dances and other cultic rites. Over centuries, the mimetic faculty has undergone transformations and for the modern man, language, and especially script, has become

[16] I will discuss the Hegelian-Lukácsian term 'second nature' in depth in the next section.

the highest level of mimetic behaviour and a repository of nonsensuous similarity.[17] It is important to note—especially for the discussion of the collective audience in film—that this experience of finding nonsensuous similarities in the cosmos was communal. Benjamin lamented that the relation of modern man to the cosmos had been reduced to the individual contemplation of starry nights. Nevertheless, Benjamin thought that modern technology opened a collective relation to the cosmos up again. The First World War was one such attempt to merge with cosmic powers, to enact on a planetary scale, in the spirit of technology, a wooing of the cosmos. Benjamin understood that the new, collective body would emerge from the collision between technology and human beings, fruit of the procreation between humanity and the cosmos.[18] The Great War was thus the first, albeit failed, attempt to organise a collective *physis* on a planetary scale. At this point, Benjamin is dangerously trifling with war. One could easily argue that the *Rausch* that he calls for can be found in war and the ecstasy of destruction. Immediately after, Benjamin separates himself from the use of technology deployed in war, but the rapturous language of this type of cosmic orgy still resonates throughout the text. Thus, he claims that, because of the use which the ruling classes made of technology, favouring domination over nature and man, technology took revenge and 'turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath.'[19] With this argument, Benjamin stresses the political importance

[17] 'On the Mimetic Faculty,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings,* vol.2, part 2, 1931-1924 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp.720-722.

[18] With this sexually-charged language, Benjamin resembles one of the theoretical sources for his anthropological materialism, Fourier, who claimed that planets have two souls and two sexes and can copulate. Therefore, they are also reproducible. Planets can copulate, first, with themselves, because the north pole is male and spreads a boreal fluid and the south pole is female and spreads the southern fluid; second, with other planets, by means of emissions from opposite poles; and, finally, through an intermediary. Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements,* ed. by Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson, trans. by Ian Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.45.

[19] 'One-Way Street,' p.487. Steiner has brought attention to the influence of *Deutsche Bauhütte*, a text written by Florens Christian Rang, a highly esteemed and respected friend of Benjamin, on the section 'To the Planetarium.' This text is a memorandum about current political events—namely the French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr district in 1923—which contains a political philosophy of technology which might have had a significant influence on Benjamin's thought on the matter. There, Rang claims that, with technology, things may accommodate to humans. Technology can likewise free humans from the enslavement implied by the human exploitation of nature. However, Rang laments, as Benjamin will do later, that while technology is used for capitalist purposes in the name of property and nations, nature will obey humans only by force. The correct use of technology, though, depends for Rang on the technician's conscience, rather than the class struggle, as in Benjamin. Furthermore, Rang links this act of conscience as a step towards the realm of God, 'a transcendently guaranteed correspondence between the individual revolution of

of using technology as the medium by which the relation between human beings and nature would turn to one of interplay.

Benjamin had found an example of the desired relation between nature and humanity through technology in the writings of the German science-fiction writer Paul Scheerbart, especially in his utopian novel *Lesabéndio* (1913).[20] Thanks to his depiction of a successful interaction between technology and humanity, Scheerbart placed himself at the centre of Benjamin's political and anthropological concerns. In fact, Benjamin was planning to write an extensive work on politics which would have as its concluding section a philosophical critique of the novel *Lesabéndio*.[21] Benjamin conceded Scheerbart's work such great relevance for his political thought because he created an image—totally foreign to his contemporaries—in which humanity 'had deployed the full range of its technology and put it to humane use.'[22] To reach this state of affairs, Benjamin wrote that for Scheerbart two demands were essential: 'first, people should discard the base and primitive belief that their task was to "exploit" the forces of nature; second, they should be true to the conviction that technology, by liberating human beings, would fraternally liberate the whole of creation.'[23] Benjamin wrote critical texts on Scheerbart from 1917-1918 to the late 1930s or even 1940. Therefore, Scheerbart's conception of nature and technology may have been ever present in Benjamin's thought and informed his writings from *One-Way Street* to the theses 'On the Concept of History.' Benjamin characterises the asteroid in which the novel *Lesabéndio* is set as 'the best of all worlds,' because

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conscience and the technological mobilization.' Benjamin, by contrast, places the mobilisation of technology by the political subject—conceived of as collective—in the realm of the profane, as I have mentioned above. Steiner, pp. 73-75.

[20] Benjamin acquired this book as a present from Gerhard Scholem on the occasion of his wedding with Dora on the 17th April 1917.

[21] This project, which was never brought to fruition as it was planned, was to be divided into three parts: the first would be called 'The True Politician,' which would be followed by a second part entitled 'True Politics,' with two different chapters (one of them being 'Critique of Violence' and the other 'Teleology without a Final Purpose'), and the third, concluding section which would be the review of the novel *Lesabéndio*. This last part would also include a critique of Ernst Bloch, possibly with references from Salomo Friedlaender's review of *Spirit of Utopia*. Although from this project only the text 'Critique of Violence' remains, we can assess from this plan the weight of Scheerbart's ideas in Benjamin's conception of politics. For further reading about this project, see Uwe Steiner, 'The True Politician.'

[22] 'On Scheerbart,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings,* vol.4, 1938-1940 (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.386.

[23] Ibid.

of the successful interaction between technology and humanity.[24] At the same time, Benjamin associates Scheerbart's utopia of the body—in which 'the Earth forms a single body together with humankind'—with his speculations regarding the psychophysical problem,[25] as can be noted in the passage about the procreation between humanity and the cosmos giving birth to a new collective body.

However, Benjamin observed in the current events of his contemporary world, and especially in Germany, a failed reception of technology, which became a recurrent theme to which Benjamin returned persistently in his writings. For example in 'Theories of German Fascism' (1930), Benjamin accuses German society of not being mature enough to make technology its organ and suggests that the war to come will be 'a slave revolt on the part of technology.'[26] In 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian' (1937), Benjamin laments a bungled reception of technology since the nineteenth century, for technology has solely served humanity to produce commodities. Furthermore, Benjamin argues that the development of technology beyond human needs may deploy destructive energies which materialise in war technology and its propagandistic preparation.[27] In the 'Work of Art' essay Benjamin analyses this use of technology, especially regarding the technologies of reproduction, and claims that if the property system keeps impeding the natural use of productive forces, the energy deployed by technology will press towards unnatural ends, that is, war and human annihilation.[28] In *One-Way Street*, as I have shown, Benjamin had already prefigured a miscarried reception of technology. Notwithstanding this failed reception, Benjamin believed that the new collective *physis* organised by technology could still be rescued and adopted by humankind. Thus, Benjamin conceived the revolts which followed the war—namely, the Soviet

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[24] Benjamin wrote to Gerhard Scholem in a letter dated 23rd November 1919 that he had written the prolegomena to a second critique of *Lesabéndio* in Lugano (which must be the essay to which Benjamin referred to as 'The True Politician'—the essay was written but has been lost) and that he wanted to begin a longer essay in which he 'intended to prove that Pallas is the best of all worlds.' *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin (1910-1940),* ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.151.
[25] This passage is from an unpublished review of Scheerbart's story *Münchhausen und Clarissa*. *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), p.148. In Steiner, p.75.
[26] 'Theories of German Fascism,' SW2, p.312.
[27] 'Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian,' SW4, pp.266, 267.
[28] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,' SW3, p.121.

Revolution and the 1919 Spartacist uprising in Germany—as attempts on the part of the proletariat to bring this new body under control. Once the recovery of this organic, proletarian techno-body was completed, mankind would take a new step in its development towards a better relation to nature and to itself. In the 'Surrealism' essay, Benjamin also called for the dialectical annihilation of the bourgeois individual psyche, because only thus could the new, collective body organised in technology be born or reappropriated by the proletariat. In this way, Benjamin introduced in his anthropological-materialist project the figure of the *Unmensch*, a destructive figure who will spring from the union with technology and will destroy civilisation as we understand it.[29] In later writings, Benjamin conceded revolutions the task of accelerating the adaptation of technology to the collective body of humanity. The role of cinema in such an enterprise was precisely to serve as a training ground for this interpenetration between technology and the collective body of mankind, which will gain its ultimate empowering intoxication (*Rausch*) in revolutionary practice.

## First and Second Nature

Further discussions about the relationship between technology, nature and the human body took shape in the debates in the 'Work of Art' essay about 'first' and 'second nature' and, eventually, 'first' and 'second technology.' In a letter regarding 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,' Adorno suggested to Benjamin that he use the Hegelian term 'second nature,' as taken up by Georg Lukács, for the section 'Daguerre, or the Panoramas,' which dealt with the relation of art to technology.[30] Benjamin first used this concept explicitly in the first version of the 'Work of Art' essay, written a few months after this exchange, although the term can be argued to have been surreptitiously present in his oeuvre before.[31] Lukács had borrowed the

[29] I will return in depth to this figure in Chapter 5, devoted to Mickey Mouse.
[30] Letter from Adorno to Benjamin, 2-4 August 1935, *The Complete Correspondence*, p.110.
[31] Adorno was very perceptive to notice the presence of this concept in Benjamin's thought; for example, in the term 'natural history' in the *Trauerspiel* book. See Adorno's lecture 'The Idea of Natural History,' analysed below. In 'Portrait of Walter Benjamin,' Adorno claimed that 'second nature' was a key concept in his work (*Prisms*, p.233). I will also argue that an earlier passage related to film, from 1927, was inherently dialogic with the concept of 'second nature' in Lukács.

concept ‘second nature’ from Hegel.[32] To simplify this division, ‘first nature’ could be defined as what is commonly understood to be nature: the mountains, the sea, in other words, what is created independently of the agency of man—including also the organic human body. ‘Second nature,’ on the other hand, is the world of human convention, the man-made structures, the social world. Lukács first used this term in *The Theory of the Novel*, in which he presented the modern reified world as incomprehensible to a subject for whom ‘second nature’ does not and cannot offer any meaning, in opposition to the epic world of the Greeks, in which a totality of life was directly given.[33] For Lukács, the novel was the epic of an age in which that extensive totality of life was no longer directly given and the immanence of meaning in life had become a problem, although the novel still thought of such a time in terms of totality. Adorno also borrowed this term from Lukács and used it from his 1932 lecture ‘The Idea of Natural History’ to his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* in 1970. For both Adorno and Lukács, the dangerous thing about ‘second nature’ is that it presents itself as if it were ‘first nature’ and, as such, presents social conditions as a natural state. In the first version of the ‘Work of Art’ essay, Benjamin used the concept ‘second nature’ in a similar way to Lukács. However, he was increasingly keen to complicate this division and implied that nature had always been affected by humans. Consequently, he eventually changed them into ‘first’ and ‘second technology’ in the second version of the ‘Work of Art’ essay.

In the first version of this essay, Benjamin described the technology liberated from a ritual function—such as film technology—as a ‘second nature.’ Benjamin points out that this ‘second nature’ stands now to society as elemental as ‘first nature’ stood to primeval society. In other words, ‘second nature’ appears to contemporary society as ‘first nature.’ Benjamin argues, in the same manner as Lukács, that we cannot control that ‘second nature’ anymore: ‘Humans of course invented, but no longer by any means master this second nature which they now confront; they are thus just as compelled to undertake an apprenticeship as they were once when confronted with

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[32] Hegel understood ‘second nature’ as the world of conventions created by man in opposition to his purely animal being—e.g. in *The Philosophy of History* Hegel conceives morality as duty (i.e. substantial Right) in terms of ‘second nature,’ in contrast to the first nature of man, which is ‘his primary merely animal existence.’ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), p.55.

[33] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p.56.

first nature.'[34] This is a similar point to the one made by Lukács in 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,' in which he not only conceptualises 'second nature' as a human construct, but also as having been completely interpenetrated by the commodity form. In this way, Lukács argues that human beings 'erect around themselves in the reality they have created and "made," a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature (more exactly: the social relations which appear in this form).'[35] Lukács is elaborating here a point made by Marx in the section about the fetishism of commodities in the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*. There, Marx reflects on the fetishistic relation adopted by commodities, which appear, as in 'the misty realm of religion,' to have life of their own, independently of the agency of humans:

> The value character of the products of labour becomes firmly established only when they act as magnitudes of value. These magnitudes vary continually, independently of the will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers. Their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them.[36]

Benjamin understands that people in this reified world cannot master that 'second nature' which appears alien to them. Nevertheless, Benjamin thinks that people, even if they do not have the capacity to control it, can at least take an apprenticeship and learn how to confront it—as people in primeval society did with regard to 'first nature.' Here, film comes into play: 'art once again places itself at the service of such an apprenticeship—and in particular film.'[37] Thus, Benjamin presents film as a training ground for human beings 'in those new apperceptions and reactions demanded by interaction with an apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding

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[34] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (first version), trans. by Michael W. Jennings, *Grey Room* 39, Special Issue 'Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art' (Spring, 2010), pp.18, 19.
[35] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p.128.
[36] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* Volume1, trans. by Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp.167, 168.
[37] 'Work of Art' (first version), p.19.

almost daily.'[38] If one pays attention to this point in the context of the discussion of 'first' and 'second nature' in the first version of the 'Work of Art' essay, it can be recognised that the apparatus is not only film, but 'second nature' in general. Michael W. Jennings and Tobias Wilke have thus claimed that Benjamin was 'reconceiving second nature itself *as* an apparatus.' Therefore, it is not only the film medium, but also 'second nature as an apparatus [that] both mediates the objects of our perception and in doing so alters its very nature.'[39] At the end of this fragment from the first version of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin makes the most important point about the historical role of film in the relation of humans to 'second nature' through technology (a point which, although implicit in the second version, appears in hidden form): 'To make the enormous technological apparatus of our time an object of human innervation—that is the historical task in whose service film finds its true meaning.'[40] Benjamin suggested that the specific, technological conditions of the medium formed a collective out of the audience. Therefore, the role of film was to embody, in all the corporeal sense of the term, technology—'second nature'—and through a collision with the audience thus create a collective body—'first nature.'

Benjamin argued that film should serve as training for human beings in their relation to 'second nature' and, at the same time, innervate in the collective body of the cinema audience a technology liberated from ritual—a technology which, despite being 'second nature' to the collective, could become their own 'first nature,' i.e. their own body. Benjamin had introduced this argument in the first text he devoted to film, 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz' (1927), which I will analyse in depth in the second chapter. In this text, Benjamin suggests that, thanks to the dissecting tools of film and to its both optical and tactile apperceptions, 'second nature' could be transformed from something incomprehensible into something sensuously comprehensible and meaningful for the collective. The language which Benjamin uses to develop this point is very similar to that used by Lukács when he presented the concepts 'first' and 'second nature' in *The Theory of the Novel*. Even though a direct connection is impossible to prove (whether it is true that, at this stage,

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Michael W. Jennings and Tobias Wilke, 'Editors' Introduction,' in 'Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics,' p.9.
[40] 'Work of Art' (first version), pp.18, 19.

Benjamin was familiar with Lukács[41]), I would like to argue that Benjamin is dialoguing in this text with Lukács' theory on 'second nature.' Lukács described the estrangement from 'first nature' and the creation of a 'second nature' in the human self-made environment as a prison for human beings—instead of as a parental home. Lukács also described 'second nature' as a complex of senses and meanings which have become rigid and strange for people:

> [These senses and meanings] form the world of convention, a world from whose all-embracing power only the innermost recesses of the soul are exempt, a world which is present everywhere in a multiplicity of forms too complex for understanding. Its strict laws, both in becoming and in being, are necessarily evident to the cognisant subject, but despite its regularity, it is a world that does not offer itself either as meaning to the aim-seeking subject or as matter, in sensuous immediacy, to the active subject. It is a second nature, and, like nature (first nature), it is determinable only as the embodiment of recognised but senseless necessities and therefore it is incomprehensible, unknowable in its real substance.[42]

Thus, for Lukács, the subject was unable to give a meaning through his/her senses to 'second nature.' In contrast, Benjamin thought that, thanks to film, the 'second nature' of people's immediate environment could be transformed from a prison-world into a journey of adventure. For him, film had the historical task of making that 'second nature' sensuously recognisable to human beings and of training human beings as apprentices to confront it. Hence, Benjamin presents the role of cinema as dynamite, which explodes (incomprehensible) 'second nature' and provides a new, closer understanding of it in a journey through its ruins:

> To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment—the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure—are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible,

[41] Benjamin first came into contact with the work of Lukács through a review of *History and Class Consciousness* written by Ernst Bloch—mentioned in a letter to Scholem from the 13th June 1924 written in Capri. On the 30th October 1928, in another letter to Scholem, Benjamin mentions that he has written a text that develops a new theory of the novel and should lay claim to a place beside Lukács (although it is unclear to which text Benjamin refers). *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, pp.241 and 342.

[42] *The Theory of the Novel*, p.62.

> meaningful, and passionate way. In themselves these offices, furnished rooms, saloons, big-city streets, stations, and factories are ugly, incomprehensible, and hopelessly sad. Or rather, they were and seemed to be, until the advent of film. The cinema then exploded this entire prison-world with the dynamite of its fractions of a second, so that now we can take extended journeys of adventure between their widely scattered ruins.[43]

The advent of cinema brought about the possibility of offering an understanding of a world which seemed to people incomprehensible. Although Benjamin does not talk about 'second nature,' we can understand that the space of people's environment—the offices, furnished rooms, big-city streets, etc.—which are for them incomprehensible are, in fact, 'second nature' and that, thanks to film, people learn some lessons about how they may confront it. Miriam Hansen argued that this fragment referred to the city film genre, rather than to Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, the real object of this article.[44] I would like to claim that Benjamin does not allude either to the former or the latter. These remarks are rather a general illustration of the interpenetration of the film apparatus with the physical environment and the new perception that arises from this relation. Hence, the film apparatus mediates the objects of our perception and transforms them into something different. For this reason, Benjamin did not hesitate to partially repeat this fragment in the 'Work of Art' essay.

### Film and the Ruins of Second Nature

It is no accident that the intervention of montage in the 'second nature' of the modern world is addressed in terms of ruins. These are a recurrent theme in Benjamin's oeuvre and certainly one of the most important subjects in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925-1928).[45] I think that, for a more thorough understanding of ruins in Benjamin's thought and its connection to the explosion of 'second nature' in film, it is worth considering the term 'natural history' (*Naturgeschichte*). Benjamin developed this concept in the *Trauerspiel* book and

[43] 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' SW2, p.17.
[44] Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema' in *October*, vol. 109 (Summer, 2004), p.22.
[45] Hereafter I will refer to this book as the *Trauerspiel* book.

Adorno borrowed it, along with Lukács' 'second nature,' for his 1932 lecture 'The Idea of Natural History.' Adorno's aim, in using the term 'natural history,' was 'to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history.' [46] This was directed against the ontological interpretation of history proposed by Martin Heidegger, who in his *Being and Time* (1927) understood history as an all-embracing structure of being, hence equivalent to its own ontology. Adorno's intention was also to establish a concrete unity between history and nature against the division of nature and spirit or nature and history posited by the tradition of subjectivistic idealism.[47] According to Susan Buck-Morss, by understanding the concepts of nature and history dialectically as mutually determining, 'Adorno refused to grant either nature or history the status of an ontological first principle.'[48] Furthermore, each concept provided the key to the demystification of the other. For Adorno, history and nature each had two poles: one dynamic and the other static. Thus, nature had a double character: on the one hand, a positive, materialist pole, referring to concrete, existing living beings—both the material products of humans' labour and their own corporeal bodies—and, on the other, a negative one, nature understood as the world not yet incorporated to history, not penetrated by reason, out of human control. Nature, in this latter pole, was posited as mythical, as what is eternally there. History, similarly, insofar as it was determined by the fact that it was only reproducing the same social relations, could be conceived as natural rather than historical. Adorno wanted to maintain these two poles—transitoriness and myth—for his project. Otherwise, if nature and history were posited as theoretical ontological principles, the double character of both nature and history would be lost and with it the potential for critical negativity: 'either social conditions were affirmed as "natural" without regard for their historical becoming, or the actual historical process was affirmed as essential.'[49] The irrational material suffering of history could therefore be understood as mere contingency, as in the case of Hegel, or as something essential to history, as in Heidegger. The result, argues Buck-Morss, was always the ideological justification of the present *status quo*.

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[46] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History,' in *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought*, no. 60 (Summer, 1984), p.111.
[47] Ibid., pp.116, 117.
[48] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1977), p.49.
[49] Ibid., p.54.

According to Adorno, with the concept of 'second nature,' Lukács had already envisioned the idea of understanding petrified history as nature and the petrified life of nature as the mere product of historical development. However, says Adorno, Lukács did so in an eschatological context. Benjamin, on the contrary, 'brought the resurrection of second nature out of infinite distance into infinite closeness and made it an object of philosophical interpretation.'[50] I would like to claim that this infinite closeness is especially relevant to his writings on cinema, where the distance between human body and object is completely reduced. In order to avoid the enchantment of history, Benjamin understood history, in his book on the *Trauerspiel*, in terms of the 'first nature' which passed away with it. He realised this idea through an analysis of the long neglected German Baroque allegorists. Benjamin showed that for these writers the theme of the allegorical was essentially history and ruins were its setting. Thus, Baroque poets saw in nature eternal transience and, hence, recognised history. According to Adorno:

> The deepest point where history and nature converge lies precisely in this element of transience. If Lukács demonstrates the retransformation of the historical, as that which has been, into nature, then here is the other side of the phenomenon: nature itself is seen as transitory nature, as history.[51]

Adorno argues that for Benjamin nature is transitory and, consequently, includes elements of history. History, in turn, is written in the countenance of nature, as transience. The form of the ruin thus takes the allegorical physiognomy of natural history; or, in other words, history, represented in the ruin, assumes the process of irresistible decay. Allegory's function is to petrify history and show that it is therefore part of nature. Nature, in turn, shows marks of transience, it passes away with history. In this moment of transiency and interruption, what has been sorrowful or unsuccessful can be expressed and rescued; or to put it differently, the untimely is actualised in the present through allegory.

Allegory was for Benjamin 'a form of expression' that signified phenomena which were originally present but which had passed away.[52] Therefore, allegory—as

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[50] Adorno, p.119.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), p.162.

expression—is a form of return to primal phenomena. Adorno thought that only through a subjective intention, as that of allegory, can we give signification to 'second nature.' For him, 'second nature' is always illusory, because we think that we understand it, but it is only a semblance which has been historically produced. Thus, we can understand the aim of allegory as to see through the false appearance of 'second nature.'

> Whenever an historical element appears it refers back to the natural element that passes away within it. Likewise the reverse: whenever 'second nature' appears, when the world of convention approaches, it can be deciphered in that its meaning is shown to be precisely its transience.[53]

Ruins are the physiognomy of 'natural history' because they show the transience of 'second nature.' It can be argued that film, by exploiting the given reality with 'the dynamite of its fractions of a second' and turning it into ruins, can to some extent decipher its meaning, give a signification to a reality which was hitherto incomprehensible. As I will develop in chapter four, Benjamin considered film to have an allegorical function—although it would be, to say the least, problematic to endow film with the same characteristics as the seventeenth-century allegory analysed in the *Trauerspiel* book.[54] The dynamite of film explodes the given reality—i.e. 'second nature'—and reduces it to rubble, showing thus the transience of that nature. Hence, this allegorical, destructive quality of film reminds us more of the allegorical function of Baudelaire's poetry. At the same time, it connects to Benjamin's continuous interest in blasting away the idea of history as a homogeneous empty line, that is, to dispel the myth of the appearance of the given material reality as permanent, to show 'history not as a systematic unity, but as fully discontinuous.'[55] Both ideas can be brought together in the image of the kaleidoscope, which Benjamin brings up in the collection of notes devoted to the allegorical intention of Baudelaire entitled 'Central Park' (1938-1939). Benjamin uses this image to illustrate his theory of history as catastrophe. For him, there is a

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[53] Ibid., p.120.
[54] I will return to the allegorical function of film and to the fragmentariness of the film form in the fourth chapter, because Benjamin left some cautious notes on the relation of a film figure such as Chaplin to allegory. I will develop Chaplin's performance in connection to Benjamin's conception of allegory and, thus, I will also deepen the broader connection between film as an apparatus and allegory.
[55] Buck-Morss, pp.56, 57.

profound truth in the image of the child's kaleidoscope, 'which with every turn of the hand dissolves the established order into a new array.'[56] The ruling class, says Benjamin, uses concepts of history which are like the mirrors of the kaleidoscope and enable the image of order to prevail. Benjamin, however, is interested in the moment of smashing the kaleidoscope: at that moment, the social order is broken into pieces and its transiency is revealed.

According to Benjamin, film, with its fragmentary nature, can perform a similar task. In a fragment related to the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin argued that a theory of film would need to take account of its dialectical structure, in which 'discontinuous images replace one another in a continuous sequence.'[57] This dialectic between discontinuity and continuity was already present in the image of the kaleidoscope. Its dialectical structure is built upon the polarity of the concept of 'natural history,' that is, transiency and myth, and hence it is fundamental to understanding Benjamin's theories on film within his broader philosophical project.[58] Nonetheless, film not only shows that 'second nature' is transient, and therefore demystifies its mythic pole, but also brings about a new perspective to penetrate and make that 'second nature' sensuously recognisable to the collective. Thus, the dynamite of film, on exploding the given reality, demystifies the idea of 'second nature' as natural and, at the same time, recovers the very moments of contingency that threaten to pass away. The 'optical unconscious' gains significance at precisely this point.

### The Optical Unconscious

Benjamin's first reference to the 'optical unconscious' can be found in the fragment from 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz' that I have analysed above. Thus, apart from an

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[56] 'Central Park,' SW4, p.164.
[57] 'The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression,' SW3, p.94.
[58] In a convolute from the *Arcades Project,* Benjamin compares the tendency of this project with the opposition in (silent) film 'between the downright jerky rhythm of the image sequence, which satisfies the deep-seated need of this generation to see the "flow" of "development" disavowed, and the continuous musical accompaniment.' Thus, Benjamin understands that what film does is what he wants to do in his theory of writing history: 'To root out every trace of "development" from the image of history and to represent becoming—through the dialectical rupture between sensation and tradition—as a constellation in being.' AP, convolute [Hº, 16], p.845. In short, Benjamin understood the dialectical relation between discontinuity and continuity inherent to film in similar terms to his project of disclaiming the concept of historical progress.

allegorical function, Benjamin also suggested that with the emergence of film, the subject-object relationship had been transformed. Benjamin introduced that fragment by stating that 'with film a *new realm of consciousness* comes into being.'[59] According to Benjamin, thanks to its 'prismatic' work, film unveils and refracts that 'second nature' which permeates everyday life. That nature now appears, through the mediation of the cinematographic apparatus, differently to our eyes.

Benjamin uses the term 'optical unconscious' for the first time in 'Little History of Photography' (1931). There Benjamin claims that, thanks to its technological nature, the photographic camera is able to record and store aspects of reality which remained invisible to the naked eye. In this recording and storage, moments of contingency which were not previously perceived were released and the beholder could access them in the contemplation of the photograph. Thus, the photograph's beholder, says Benjamin, 'feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject.'[60] In the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin returns to the 'optical unconscious' and describes it with nearly the same words:

> Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera compared to the eye. 'Other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the split second when a person actually takes a step. We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods. This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.[61]

[59] 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' SW2, p.17. Italics in the original.
[60] 'Little History of Photography,' SW2, p.510.
[61] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.117.

Thus, Benjamin suggested that the film apparatus captured aspects of reality which were unnoticeable through immediate perception. However, it remains to be resolved what that 'other nature' (*eine andere Natur*) is that speaks directly to our unconscious.[62] Joshua Gold sought to answer this question by interpreting this fragment in connection to Benjamin's early theory of language. Gold concludes that Benjamin approached the 'modern visual technologies in terms of their capacity to *vocalize* the extremities of modern experience, thereby rendering audible (and hence intelligible) what would otherwise remain mute.'[63] In his early 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (1926), Benjamin presented the act of naming as the attempt to complete the Creation of God and restore the primordial state of the world as paradise before the Fall of Man. For Benjamin, nature is mute. This does not mean that nature is not communicable, but only that nature is speechless. Nonetheless, nature is imbued with an unspoken language, which is the residue of the creative word of God. Man has the gift of naming and can thus, through language (as a means), give nature a voice. Benjamin describes the act of naming as a translation of the mute into the sonic, of the nameless into name: 'It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely knowledge.'[64] In the twentieth century, however, it seems that Benjamin considered film as the medium—*qua* mediator—*par excellence* to articulate the speech of nature. This nature, nevertheless, is not the nature of creation (i.e. 'first nature'), but rather—as he puts it in the text on *Potemkin*—the nature of our 'offices, furnished rooms, saloons, big-city streets, stations, and factories.'[65] The cinematographic apparatus articulates the speech of nature, but a nature which is

[62] Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement*, also refers to 'another nature' ('*einer andern Natur*'), which is, in this case, the product of human imagination in the field of aesthetics. Translator James Creed Meredith has symptomatically translated this 'other nature' as 'second nature': 'The imagination (as a productive faculty of cognition) is a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature. … By this means we come to feel our freedom from the law of association (which attaches to the empirical employment of the imagination), with the result that the material can be borrowed by us from nature in accordance with that law, but be worked up by us into something else—namely, what surpasses nature.' Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith, ed. by Nicholas Walker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.143. It can be argued that, in Benjamin, that 'other nature' which speaks to the camera is also a material borrowed from nature which is worked up by the very mediation of the apparatus.

[63] Joshua Robert Gold, '"Another Nature Which Speaks to the Camera": Film and Translation in the Writings of Walter Benjamin' in *MLN* 122.3 (2007), p.603. Italics in the original.

[64] 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,' SW1, p.70.

[65] 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' SW2, p.17.

indeed 'second nature' to us. As I anticipated in the comparison of this fragment with Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel*, Gold argues that film can translate the imperfect language of 'second nature,' of our physical surroundings, into a more perfect language. According to him, the revolutionary potential of film and photography to transform human perception consists of the way that the form of disclosure of the physical surroundings opened up by the 'optical unconscious' entails simultaneously a mode of articulation. The task of the film apparatus in modernity is precisely to articulate the shocks of modern life and render communicable aspects of experience which had hitherto remained incomprehensible to the subject.

The 'optical unconscious' can be conceived, therefore, as that potential opened up by the mediation of film technology to reveal a world which had remained unseen to our naked eye—a theme which was very popular among other early film theorists.[66] Film

[66] Benjamin is undoubtedly indebted to Rudolf Arnheim. In the XVI section of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin complements his ideas on the 'optical unconscious' with more technical terminology thanks to his reading of Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art*.

> With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly 'in any case,' but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them—aspects 'which do not appear as the retarding of natural movements but have a curious gliding, floating character of their own.' ('Work of Art,' SW3, p.117)

The latter quote, from Arnheim, comes from a section devoted to slow motion in which he advocates experimentation with slow motion and acceleration in order to find out how the human face or the body would appear to the camera [*Film As Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p.100]. Admittedly, Arnheim's approach to film was different to Benjamin's, but he discovered some artistic capacities in the film apparatus which were similar to the 'optical unconscious.' Like Benjamin, Arnheim thought that the camera might make objects speak. Thus, he argued that by eliminating entire areas of sensory perception and bringing others into relief a film director 'can let the dumb speak and thereby interpret the sphere of sound.' (pp.113, 114. It is worth noting that Arnheim is here talking about silent film.) Arnheim argues that a director does not only show the world objectively, but also subjectively and can thus 'intervene in the structure of nature,' make connections between events and objects, create new worlds or 'breathe life into stone.' (p.114).

The Hungarian artist associated with the Bauhaus, Lázlo Moholy-Nagy, arrived at a similar concept in his book *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), which Benjamin quoted in his essay on photography. Moholy-Nagy argued that the camera had expanded the visual image, which is no longer tied to the 'narrow limits of our eye.' [Lázlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. by Janet Seligman (London: Lund Humphries, 1969), p.7] In a very similar vein to Benjamin's definition of the 'optical unconscious,' Moholy-Nagy writes:

> For if people had been aware of these potentialities they would have been able with the aid of the photographic camera to *make visible* existences which cannot be perceived or taken in by our optical instrument, the eye; *i.e., the photographic camera can either complete or supplement our optical instrument, the eye*. (p.28. Italics in the original)

has a revelatory capacity to show and give speech to a world that had remained mute and hidden. Benjamin coined the term 'optical unconscious' in direct relation to psychoanalysis. Hence, he suggested that the apparatus reveals a world that remains unseen to the human eye in a similar way to the psychic unconscious, which reveals itself to the interpretation of psychoanalysis. Thus, as with the instinctual unconscious, the camera captures aspects of reality which lie outside the normal spectrum of sense impressions. In the third version of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin expands the relation between Freud and the 'optical unconscious.' He argues that, just as the book *On the Psychopathology of Everyday Life* 'isolated and made analyzable things which had previously floated unnoticed on the broad stream of perception,' film accomplished a 'similar deepening of apperception throughout the entire spectrum of optical—and now also auditory—impressions.'[67]

There is, however, a crucial difference between Benjamin's optical unconscious and Freud's theories of the unconscious. As Miriam Hansen notes, Benjamin not only locates the unconscious in the human subject, but also outside the subject in the material world.[68] She argues that through the 'optical unconscious,' Benjamin, in tune with other film theorists of the time, such as Béla Balázs, Jean Epstein and Rudolf Arnheim, expresses the potential of the camera to lend physiognomic expression to objects and make 'second nature' return the gaze.[69] For her, this potential of the camera would be a profane expression of the aura, which rests upon 'a projection of a social experience among human beings onto nature,' as Benjamin himself defined it in 'Central Park.'[70] Hansen claims that in the 'optical unconscious' there is a similar psychic projection from subject to object. Thus, the beholder may encounter something encrypted in the image that triggers his/her involuntary

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Technologies of reproduction have thus changed our perception. For that reason, Moholy-Nagy says that after a hundred years of photography and a few decades of film, 'we see the world with entirely different eyes.' (p.29) However, he laments that most of the capacities which are offered up by these technologies have not yet been fully exploited.

[67] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (third version), SW4, p.265. In this way, Benjamin implies that with the arrival and spread of sound film an 'acoustic unconscious' also came into being.

[68] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2012), p.156.

[69] Hansen, 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology"' in *New German Critique*, no. 40, special issue on Weimar Film Theory (Winter, 1987), pp.209, 210.

[70] Ibid., pp.187, 188. In 'Central Park,' SW4, p.173.

memory. The film apparatus in either case is the necessary mediator for this two-way process of projection and reception. The 'second nature' that displays itself to the eye through the mediation of the camera contains the content of the beholder's psyche, which according to Esther Leslie becomes externalised in the technological effects of the apparatus.[71] This argument, however, has been misunderstood by a number of scholars. For example, Michael Taussig argues that Benjamin confounds subject with object by situating the unconscious in the object rather than in the perceiver.[72] Similarly, Rosalind Krauss wonders whether visual phenomena can have an unconscious, positing that it is incomprehensible to place an unconscious in the optical field. She argues—in relation to the apprehension of mass movements by the camera—that mass patterns organised within the visual field can have an unconscious, but in the eventuality that there would be a collective unconscious, it would be a human one.[73] These authors, therefore, did not understand the psychic projection onto the object involved in the 'optical unconscious.' Benjamin develops a similar theory in his text 'Dream Kitsch' (1927). In this essay, he analyses how, in the picture puzzles of their dreamworks, the surrealists search the content of dreams on the trail of things, rather than of the psyche. In this way, surrealists turn things towards the dream and thus 'take in the energies of an outlived world of things.'[74] Objects end up, therefore, yielding to the interior of human beings. Benjamin, then, understands that film reception takes, as dream does for the surrealists, an objective direction, one directed towards the world of things. It is in this way that Benjamin makes external objects speak to the camera, revealing in them—*qua* projection—aspects of our own nature and providing them with an unconscious.

The idea of attributing a consciousness to objects was also developed by the Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs. Benjamin and Balázs were in fact acquaintances and held some theoretical debates.[75] Gertrud Koch has argued that the

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[71] Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, p.156.
[72] Michael Taussig, 'Tactility and Distraction,' in *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 2 (May, 1991), p.149.
[73] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1993), p.179.
[74] 'Dream Kitsch: The Gloss of Surrealism,' SW2, p.4.
[75] There are records of, at least, one conversation at the end of 1929 which revolved around language. Benjamin wrote down a note after the conversation in which he harshly criticised Balázs because he was only able to utter commonplaces belonging to mystical philosophies of language. 'Notes on a Conversation with Béla Balázs,' SW2, p.277.

influence of Balázs in Benjamin's theories on film is undeniable, although Benjamin never quoted him in any of his texts on film.[76] According to Balázs, the film apparatus can give physiognomic qualities not only to animate objects, but also to inanimate ones. Miriam Hansen argues that both Benjamin and Balázs tried to appropriate anthropological, mimetic and mnemotecnic dimensions of the concept of image developed by the *Lebensphilosophie* and, especially, Ludwig Klages, who affirmed a non-conceptual, immediate experience of things against the rationalisation and abstraction imposed by the market. However, while the vitalists rejected film as part of the problem of the loss of experience, Balázs and Benjamin sought to redefine the possibility of experience in this medium.[77] In his poetics of film, Balázs emphasises—similarly to Benjamin—that the camera can reveal a world 'which could not otherwise be seen with the naked eye or in everyday life.'[78] Balázs argues that the camera is able to provide a new meaning and significance to the objects depicted. It is not mere reproduction, because the objects represented are different to our eyes once projected. Thus, Balázs argues that the camera endows the objects with 'visual anthropomorphism.'[79] In this way, he talks not only about the face of things, but also about the soul of objects, the secret language of dumb things, the rhythm of crowds and the hidden life of little things. Balázs claims that:

> The first new world discovered by the film camera in the days of the silent film was the world of very small things visible only from very short distances, the hidden life of little things. By this the camera showed us not only hitherto unknown objects and events: the adventures of beetles in a wilderness of blades of grass, the tragedies of day-old chicks in a corner of the poultry-run, the erotic battles of flowers and the poetry of miniature landscapes. It brought us not only new themes. By means of the close-up the camera in the days of the silent film revealed also the hidden mainsprings of a life which we had

[76] See Gertrud Koch, 'Béla Balázs: The Physiognomy of Things,' in *New German Critique*, no. 40, special issue on Weimar Film Theory (Winter, 1987), pp.167, 177.
[77] Hansen, Miriam Hansen, '"Of Lightning Rods, Prisms, and Forgotten Scissors": Potemkin and German Film Theory,' in *New German Critique*, no. 95, special issue for David Bathrick (Spring-Summer, 2005), p.171.
[78] Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. and ed. by Edith Bone (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p.65.
[79] Ibid., p.60.

> thought we already knew so well. … The close-up has not only widened our vision of life, it has also deepened it.[80]

Similarly to Balázs, Benjamin was aware that film could have both an artistic and a scientific function.[81] In the largely changed section on the optical unconscious in the third version of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin claims that one of the revolutionary functions of film is to prove that the artistic and scientific uses of photography are identical, refuting thus the general separation of both dimensions. In scientific films, says Benjamin, it is 'difficult to say which is more fascinating, its artistic value or its value for science.'[82] Koch argues that for Benjamin the camera becomes a 'demiurge which builds a new world out of the rubble of the old one, a new world that had always been there but had never been unveiled.'[83] Hence, she claims that Benjamin's ideas on the cinematographic apparatus tend to an 'aesthetic of unveiling.' In this point, stressed by the comparison with Balázs, it is easy to see that, for Benjamin, the main capacity of film was to unveil that world that remained unseen to us, something common to both science and art. For this reason, Benjamin argues that the artistic function of film and photography may be seen as incidental, precisely because the main task of film is that of providing a new understanding of the world, regardless of whether it can be used to produce artistic value as well.

Both Balázs and Benjamin perceived another function of film apart from revealing things which had remained unseen to the human eye: that of estranging us from the familiar. In his theory of the close-up, Balázs put it thus: 'The close-up can show us a quality in a gesture of the hand we never noticed before when we saw that hand stroke or strike something.'[84] This argument is similar to Benjamin's claim that with film we can, for the first time, become familiar with 'what really goes on between hand and metal' in the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon and how this relation between body and object changes according to different moods.

[80] Ibid., pp.54, 55.
[81] For further reading about microcinematography and the distribution of these scientific films to the wider public as artistic recreation, see Hanna Landecker, 'Cellular Features: Microcinematography and Film Theory,' in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 4 (Summer 2005), pp.903-937.
[82] 'Work of Art' (third version), SW4, p.265.
[83] Gertrud Koch, 'Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art' Essay' in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds., *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.214.
[84] Balázs, p.55.

This is possible, argues Benjamin, because of the camera's resources 'for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object.'[85] Thus, the cinematographic apparatus offers a revelatory function with which to unveil the relation between human beings and matter. For this reason, Benjamin claims that film is an excellent means of materialist exposition. To prove this, he quotes Pudovkin: 'to connect the performance of an actor with an object, and to build that performance around the object … is always one of the most powerful methods of cinematic construction.'[86] In short, Benjamin thought that film had opened up the possibility of dissecting the 'second nature' that had heretofore been incomprehensible to human beings. Thus, out of the fragments dynamited by the camera, film could articulate a new understanding of the world which was more comprehensible to the collective audience of cinemas.

## First and Second Technology

As noted above, Benjamin was particularly concerned about the changes in the human sensorium caused by the alteration of the environment through technology. On the one hand, Benjamin maintained that modes of perception change historically, because the medium in which human perception is organised is conditioned not only by nature but also by history.[87] On the other hand, in *One-Way Street* Benjamin said that the 'species mankind' is only at the beginning of its development and has to adapt to the new nature which, as I have shown, also incorporates technology. One of the greatest concerns of Benjamin's anthropological materialism was precisely the adaptation of technology into the collective body of humankind as an organ. Technology, belonging to the 'second nature' of the man-made world, could be part of the 'first nature' of the new, emerging collective body.

In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin quotes a fragment from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in which he claims that man's real nature is the nature which develops in social history. Nature develops with industry and, although it appears in an estranged form, this is, according to Marx, 'true *anthropological*

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[85] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.117.
[86] Ibid., n126.
[87] Ibid., p.104.

nature.'[88] Like Marx, Benjamin considered that nature has always been worked upon and thus has increasingly been inscribed in society—hence the concepts 'natural history' and 'second nature.' Technology, like other man-made structures of 'second nature,' started to show characteristics of what Adorno would have called the negative, mythic pole of nature—i.e. it seemed to escape reason. As a consequence, in the second version of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin felt the need to produce two concepts which, although formally similar to those of 'first' and 'second nature,' focused now on the aims and uses of the technologies which were shaping the social world. These concepts were 'first' and 'second technology.'

The passage in which Benjamin discusses these terms in the 'Work of Art' essay is the fragment that underwent the most changes over the course of the three versions. In the first version, he introduced the concepts 'first' and 'second nature'; in the second, he substituted 'first' and 'second technology' for the former; and, eventually, in the third version, these two pairs of concepts were removed. The second version's conceptualisation of 'first' and 'second technology' morphologically resembles the first pair, but it actually involves an internal division within 'second nature'—which does not affect the whole category. What this new formulation does is complicate the first definitions of technology which Benjamin had developed in prior texts. Thus, technology is classified according to its conception: either as the mythical account of technology which is the standpoint of the imperialist mastery of nature or as a technology liberated from magic, which aims to be deployed for humane purposes. Hence, 'first technology' existed in fusion with ritual and made use of human beings, culminating in human sacrifice. The aim of this 'first technology' was the mastery of nature—and of man. 'Second technology,' instead, reduced the use of human beings to a minimum. The aim of 'second technology' was—like the first definition of technology given by Benjamin—the mastery of the relation between humanity and nature. Thereby, the decisive function Benjamin ascribed to technologically reproducible art, especially film, was the training practice (*Einübung*) of this interplay between nature and humans.

According to Benjamin, art is linked to both 'first' and 'second technology.' As Benjamin argues throughout the 'Work of Art' essay, art has always been based on

[88] AP, convolute [X1a, 3], p.652. Italics in the original.

ritual. However, with the arrival of the technologies of reproduction, the ritualistic function of art has withered and only remains parasitically in some works of art. Benjamin also points out that the results of 'first technology' are valid for eternity, whereas those of 'second technology' are wholly provisional. 'Second technology' is, in other words, based on testing and scientific procedures, that is, on experimentation and play (*Spiel*). Benjamin conceived semblance (*Schein*) and play as the two aspects of art and mimesis. In a note related to the composition of the 'Work of Art' essay, he associated play with Schiller, while semblance was presented as the passionate interest that determined Goethe's aesthetics.[89] According to Benjamin, semblance has always been present in the magical procedures of 'first technology.' Play, on the contrary, 'is the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimenting procedures of the second.'[90] For Benjamin, film escapes from the 'beautiful semblance' on which prior art had always been based. The example that Benjamin gives is the shooting of a film in which an actor is frightened in order that his expression might be recorded unawares. The expression of this actor, who is not miming such a gesture, will later be edited with other shots filmed in other places and perhaps with other methods. Benjamin plays here with the words 'play' and 'semblance.' He says that the mime could be said to *present* his subject *as semblance*, but also to *play* his subject. With the example of the actor who is recorded without his knowledge, Benjamin claims that in film the dimension of play is larger than that of semblance.[91] The disregard for the uniqueness of the object and the discontinuous process of production also prove the decay of the element of semblance in film in favour of play. In conclusion, Benjamin argues that 'what is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spiel-Raum*].'[92] Schiller described the element of play in art as 'everything which is neither subjectively nor objectively contingent, and yet imposes no kind of constraint either from within or from without.'[93] He thought that through the contemplation of beauty, the psyche finds itself in a medium between the sphere of physical necessity and the realm of law and, because it is divided between the two,

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[89] 'The Significance of Beautiful Semblance,' SW3, p.137.
[90] 'Work of Art,' SW3, n127.
[91] Ibid., p.113.
[92] Ibid., n127.
[93] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), pp.103, 105.

it is also removed from the constraints of both. Benjamin based 'second technology' precisely on this play-drive in which human beings separated themselves from the dominion of nature and its physical forces: 'The origin of the second technology lies at the point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies, in other words, in play.'[94]

In the XVI section of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin says that the equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus is not only achieved by man's representation of himself, but also by the representation of his environment. Next, he refers to two levels at which the apparatus can operate to achieve this representation:

> On the one hand, film furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*].[95]

The 'room for play' expanded by film is associated with the capacity for experimentation opened up by the 'second technology' on which the medium is based. In the comparison between the camera operator and the painter, Benjamin presented the famous image of the cinematographic apparatus which enters reality as a surgical tool. Thus, whereas the painter maintained a natural distance from reality, the cinematographer penetrated deeply into its tissue. If the former created a total image, the cinematographer's image was piecemeal, 'its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law.'[96] For Benjamin, the single shot, or the direct intervention of the photographic camera, does not constitute film as art: 'The work of art is only produced by means of montage [*auf Grund der Montage*].'[97] For that reason, any individual element takes part of the whole, but does not constitute what the work of art is as such. According to Benjamin, 'Film is the first art form whose artistic character is entirely determined by its reproducibility.'[98] In this way, he opposes film to Greek sculpture, as an example of 'first technology.' Whereas the

[94] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.107.
[95] Ibid., p.117.
[96]Ibid., p.116.
[97] Ibid., p.110.
[98] Ibid., p.109.

latter is produced all of a piece, the former is assembled from a number of images and sequences. The editor thus has a vast array of options when assembling the images in a whole. In short, film has a great capacity for improvement. This capacity is present throughout the process of production, through montage (where there is wide room for manoeuvre) until the final cut which decides the form of the work of art.

In his discussion about ‘first’ and ‘second technology,’ Benjamin defines the role of revolutions as the attempt to accelerate the adaptation of ‘second technology’ to the ‘historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology.’[99] In other words, revolutions are attempts to produce a collective body and to eventually gain control over it by innervating and adapting ‘second technology’ into the collective, which takes on bodily shape in the ecstasy of revolutionary practice. This conception of revolution is, on the one hand, utopian—in the tradition of Fourier—and, on the other hand, spontaneous. In fact, Benjamin found that the energy that would ultimately be discharged through this collective body would come through a spontaneous upheaval, rather than from party-led politics (I will return to this argument in chapter five). For Benjamin, ‘second technology’ is a system in which the mastering of elementary social forces—the emerging collective techno-body—is now a prerequisite for playing with nature. According to him, ‘second technology’ aims to liberate humanity from drudgery through play. Thanks to the ‘room for play’ (*Spielraum*) opened up by the ‘second technology’ of film, the collective can set and test revolutionary and utopian demands. In this training for revolution, the collective should make ‘second technology’ its own and liberate itself from ‘first technology.’

With the term ‘innervation,’ Benjamin was referring to a collective adaptation to technology. Benjamin borrowed this concept from Freud, for whom the term designates a rush of energy through the nervous system. Hence, Benjamin adopts this term to highlight, on the one hand, the corporeality of the collective *physis* to which technology adapts and, on the other, the energy which, according to Benjamin, is deployed by technology—an energy which can be both advantageous and destructive, depending on whether the technology is put to humane use or, on the contrary, strips human needs. One of Benjamin’s earliest uses of the term

[99] ‘Work of Art,’ SW3, n124.

‘innervation’ is found in *One-Way Street*. There he compares the typewriter with a fountain pen:

> The typewriter will alienate the hand of the man of letters from the pen only when the precision of typographic forms has directly entered the conception of his books. One might suppose that new systems with more variable typefaces would then be needed. They will replace the pliancy of the hand with the innervation of commanding fingers.[100]

Benjamin is here calling for a prosthesis of the human body in the form of a technology more advanced than the typewriter. He is thus prefiguring digital technologies which can be used as prostheses of the human, organic body. According to Miriam Hansen, with this idea Benjamin ‘anticipates ways in which contemporary technologies both interface with the bodily sensorium and extend it into and through the apparatus.’[101] However, rather than the innervation of technology into an individual body, Benjamin thought of innervation as a collective process of adaptation. For that reason, film—itself a collective medium—became an exemplary realm for such collective innervation.

Having said this, we can return to the ‘Surrealism’ essay, the text in which Benjamin makes his anthropological-materialist project more clear and resumes his theory, initially developed in ‘Outline of the Psychophysical Problem’ and *One-Way Street*, of a collective *physis* organised by technology. In the praxis of the surrealists, Benjamin finds a space in which the ‘energies of intoxication’ supplied by Surrealism can burst a revolutionary discharge through the bodily innervations of the collective. From the beginning of the essay, Benjamin argues that intellectual currents—such as surrealism—can generate a sufficient ‘head of water’ to run a power station.[102] Although Benjamin starts talking about a critic or a German

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[100] ‘One-Way Street,’ SW1, p.457. Benjamin probably based this idea on a passage from *Lesabéndio* in which Scheerbart writes about the potential of the inhabitants of the asteroid Pallas to develop fountain pens out of their fingers: ‘Most of the work done here would have been impossible if the Pallasians did not each have many different hands, some coarse and some sensitive and fine. The more delicate hands also had fingers that the Pallasians could use to write, without any other equipment, just as if they were fountain pens.’ Paul Scheerbart, *Lesabéndio,* trans. by Christina Svendsen (Cambridge, Mass.: Wakefield Press, 2012), p.37.

[101] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience,* p.151.

[102] ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,’ SW2, p.207.

observer who can take advantage of this electric current, it is eventually the collective body which is supplied with this power in the form of an electric innervation. In order to theorise the different organisation of space in art and everyday life in modernity, Benjamin developed the concepts 'image-space' (*Bildraum*) and 'body-space' (*Leibraum*). The surrealists, he argued, had succeeded in bringing together image- and body-space, challenging the traditional conception of art that began 'at a distance of two meters from the body.'[103] The site for political action for surrealists was a 'one hundred percent image-space.'[104] As the habitat of the masses was being dominated by the image-space, there was no longer a distance between image- and body-space. The space of this collision between image- and body-space was for the surrealists the site for their artistic/political action. In this reconfiguration of physical space, Hansen argues that, for Benjamin, images 'have come to inhabit a three-dimensional and public space, the space of the collective.'[105] Thus, Benjamin understood, in the framework of his anthropological materialism, that technology had changed the human bodily sensorium and provided the collective with a new *physis* which should be re-appropriated and embodied by the proletariat. The collision between body- and image-space could supply the necessary energies to innervate and, therefore, empower the collective body in a revolutionary way:

> The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervations, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.[106]

In her essay 'Room-for-Play: Walter Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema,' Miriam Hansen identified the connection between the 'Surrealism' essay and Benjamin's writings on film as being part of his project of anthropological materialism. She

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[103] 'Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism,' SW2, pp.4, 5.
[104] 'Surrealism,' SW2, p.217.
[105] Hansen, 'Room-for-Play,' p.21.
[106] 'Surrealism,' SW2, p.218.

argued that the technologies of reproduction had opened an expanding image-space which had become—as the surrealists recognised—the habitat of the masses. Cinema thus emerged as a medium in which the collective could reappropriate its own techno-body. The 'room for play' offered by film should not only create the realm for a relation of interplay between humanity and nature, but also for gaining control of that new body which emerges out of the collision of the proletariat and technology. Art—or, more accurately, the art which is no longer based on contemplation, of which film is the main exponent—is a space (an interpenetration between body- and image-space) for political actuality (*Aktualität*), in which Benjamin's conception of revolutions as innervations of the collective may materialise. Thus, Hansen remarks that 'This image-space ... is no longer separate from the "space of the body"' and 'cannot be grasped from a position of contemplative distance characteristic of bourgeois high culture.'[107] The relation between the body of the audience and the image on the screen was no longer perceived only by optical means, but by the whole body. This different reception of art required a new theory of aesthetics, which Benjamin developed in the 'Work of Art' essay.

### *Aisthēsis*: the Aesthetics of Film Reception

In the 'Work of Art' essay Benjamin developed a theory about how the perception of the senses had changed with film. In the fourth section he introduced the intellectual sources through which he planned to develop this new conception of perception and reception. Thus, Benjamin referred to the work of the Vienna School art historians Aloïs Riegl and Franz Wickhoff, because, in opposition to the art-historical tradition of their age, they used art to draw conclusions regarding the organisation of perception at the time of the production of a specific form of art. Benjamin draws the following conclusions:

> The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history. The era of the migration of peoples, an era which saw the rise of the Roman art industry and

[107] Hansen, 'Room-for-Play,' pp.22, 23.

> the Vienna Genesis, developed not only an art different from that of antiquity but also a different perception.[108]

Following Riegl's and Wickhoff's work, Benjamin draws a general statement which he uses as the methodological principle for his essay: '*Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.*'[109] Thus, Benjamin wanted to study how the mode of perception of the collective had changed with the appearance of technologically reproducible art, especially film. For Benjamin, the decay of the aura resulted from the changes of perception caused by the appearance and spread of the technologies of reproduction. The social basis of this decay was related to the historical emergence of the masses and was grounded in two circumstances: '*the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction*.'[110] This phenomenon began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the first collective artworks, especially panoramas, and with the first art based entirely on technological reproduction, namely photography. In the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin presents this process as follows: 'The simultaneous viewing of paintings by a large audience, as happens in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis in painting, a crisis triggered not only by photography but, in a relatively independent way, by the artwork's claim to the attention of the masses.'[111] For Benjamin, the technological nature of a medium, in this case panoramas, conditions a specific form of reception.[112]

In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin refers repeatedly to panoramas as antecedents of film. It is worth noting, though, that Benjamin talked about different types of panoramas in his writings. On the one hand, in the *Arcades Project*, he talked about the Parisian panoramas, particularly those situated in the Passage des Panoramas at

[108] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.104.
[109] Ibid. Italics in the original.
[110] Ibid, p.105. Italics in the original.
[111] Ibid., p.116.
[112] In fact, Benjamin did not hold this idea only with regard to art forms, but also to other technological creations. For example, in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes: 'The historical signature of the railroad may be found in the fact that it represents the first means of transport—and, until the big ocean liners, no doubt also the last—to form masses.' AP, convolute [U18, 5], p.620.

the beginning of the nineteenth century. In their traditional form panoramas were big circular representations hung in the walls of a rotunda; the audience looked at the pictures from a raised platform in the centre of the building. A number of versions appeared over the following years in Paris, of which Benjamin was aware.[113] In fact, he focuses on one of them, the diorama of Daguerre, open from 1822 to 1839. Daguerre's diorama introduced lights, sound and movement 'to reproduce the changing daylight in the landscape, the rising of the moon, the rush of waterfalls' in the representation.[114] In these changes of illumination Benjamin saw a playful precedent of the cinematographic acceleration of time.[115] According to Benjamin, these deceptively lifelike changes in represented nature 'prepare[d] the way not only for photography but for [silent] film and sound film.'[116] On the other hand, Benjamin talked about the panorama he knew and attended in Berlin in his childhood, the Kaiser Panorama. In this panorama people were seated around a circular apparatus in different stations. A sequence of stereoscopic images twirled around and stayed a short time in front of each viewer.

In a footnote to the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin situates film in a line of development in which, he says, 'apparently insignificant social changes often foster a change in reception which benefits only the new art form.'[117] Benjamin refers here to the creation of a collective audience in film, which was preceded by the simultaneous viewing of a circular series of images from different stations in the above-mentioned panoramas and, later, in Edison's kinetoscope, the apparatus in which he projected his first film strips, which still had to be seen individually through a peep-show. According to Benjamin, this type of panorama preceded the kind of reception typical of film by assembling a collective audience around it. In the Kaiser Panorama, writes Benjamin, 'the audience faced a screen into which stereoscopes were fitted, one for each spectator. In front of these stereoscopes single

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113 In the following convolute Benjamin writes down the numerous variations of panoramas which appeared in Paris: 'There were panoramas, dioramas, cosmoramas, diaphanoramas, navaloramas, pleoramas (pleō, "I sail," "I go by water"), fantoscope[s], fantasma-parastases, phantasmagorical and fantasmaparastatic *expériences*, picturesque journeys in a room, georamas; optical picturesque, cinéoramas, phanoramas, stereoramas, cycloramas, *panorama dramatique*.' AP, convolute [Q1,1], p.527.

114 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' (1935 exposé), SW3, p.34.

115 AP, Convolute [Q 1a, 4], p.529.

116 'Paris,' SW3, p.35.

117 'Work of Art,' SW3, n131.

images automatically appeared, remained briefly in view, and then gave way to others.' [118] Benjamin describes his own experience in this panorama in 'Berlin Childhood around 1900' (1938). He narrates how, as a child, he was seated at a station from which he looked through a double window at the image, in a circular screen which spun around and passed through all the viewing stations. Benjamin recalls that a little bell rang a few seconds before each picture moved off and passed through to the next image. Thus, the images of this panorama ('mountains with their humble foothills,' 'cities with their mirror-bright windows,' 'railroad stations with their clouds of dirty yellow smoke,' vineyards, the French town of Aix-en-Provence, the fjords or tropical coconut palms) were always permeated with the mark of their departure. For that reason, he formed the conviction that 'it was impossible to exhaust the splendors of the scenes at just one sitting,' and therefore the child Benjamin felt the urge to come back the next day—something he was unable to do.[119]

Siegfried Kracauer remembers similar impressions of the Kaiser Panorama, which he also attended when he was a boy, in his article 'Farewell to Linden Arcade' (1930)—as the *Kaisergalerie* was also known. Kracauer finds that in this arcade, in similar terms to the anthropological materialism of Benjamin, 'the voyage which is the journey from the near to the far and the linkage of body and image can manifest itself.'[120] In the panorama, Kracauer argues that you are transported to exotic places at the same time as you are distanced from familiar ones. Thus, in comparison to the Anatomy Museum which was also situated in the *Kaisergalerie*, Kracauer claims that there 'is only a tiny leap from the graspable body to the ungraspable distance.'[121] Thus, when he visited the panorama, he felt transported to faraway places in the same way, he says, as he did when looking at picture books. In these attractions, as one can deduce from Benjamin and Kracauer, the relation of the viewer and the object was becoming more and more corporeal. The image was no longer motionless and, every time the cylinder glided to the next image, the train of associations was

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[118] Ibid. The *Kaiserpanorama* (or Imperial Panorama) was in the Kaisergalerie, an arcade that connected the Friedrichstraße and the Bahrenstraße in Berlin.
[119] 'Berlin Childhood around 1900,' SW3, p.347.
[120] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Farewell to the Linden Arcade,' *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Masss. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.338.
[121] Ibid., p.340.

interrupted—obviously, to a lesser extent than in film. Benjamin also recalls an anecdote with which he illustrates the dialectics of the development of this technology:

> Shortly before film turned the viewing of images into a collective activity, image viewing by the individual, through the stereoscopes of these soon outmoded establishments, was briefly intensified, as it had been once before in the isolated contemplation of the divine image by the priest in the cella.[122]

Therefore, the development of this form of reception in film also produced a temporal resistance in the form of the (nearly) individual view of these images through a peepshow—thereby maintaining a pseudo-auratic relationship with the artwork in terms of an individual experience in its reception. Benjamin and Kracauer wrote these texts almost as an act of mourning for the panorama. Thus, Benjamin remembered that at the end of his infancy, fashion was turning its back on the *Kaiserpanorama* and, as a consequence, he used to visit it in a half-empty room. Kracauer revisited the arcade when it had been completely restructured and, according to him, looked then like the vestibule of a department store. Likewise, he observed the actualisation of what Benjamin would have called the dialectics of the development of technology: the *Kaiserpanorama*, writes Kracauer, 'has been superseded by a cinema.'[123]

Benjamin returns to Riegl's theory in the eighteenth section of the 'Work of Art' essay, in which he presents his theory of the reception in distraction (*Zerstreuung*) of film. For Benjamin, the reception in distraction is '*a symptom of profound changes in perception*' and '*finds in the cinemas its central place.*'[124] Benjamin presents the reception in distraction as antithetical to the reception in contemplation. The reception in cinema has, first of all, attracted a greater mass of participants and, therefore, says Benjamin, requires a new mode of participation. Thus, whereas for Benjamin a person who contemplates a work of art is absorbed by it, the masses attract the artwork into themselves—or, as he says in the first version, there is a regrouping of perceptions which is primarily actualised on a *taktisch* basis. Here

[122] 'Work of Art,' SW3, n131.
[123] Kracauer, p.342.
[124] 'Work of Art' (first version), p.34 (italics in the original); and in the second version, SW3, p.120.

Benjamin brings about this other concept developed by Riegl. Through it, Benjamin compares the reception of architecture, as analysed by Riegl in his *Late Roman Art Industry*, with cinema. Buildings are received both tactilely and optically.[125] Riegl said that the sense organ which we use most for the perception of external objects is the eye. However, this sense only shows us the coloured planes of external objects. It is the tactile sense which perceives the three-dimensionality of the object. Thus, we obtain 'definite knowledge about the enclosed individual unity of single objects … only with our sense of touch.'[126] It is through repetition that we arrive at a notion of an extended plane with its dimensions of width and height. But this notion is no longer necessarily obtained by an immediate perception, but through the combination of different perceptions, basically tactile and optical, and the intervention of subjective thinking. Benjamin makes a very similar remark about the reception of architecture and highlights that the tactile perception inherent to architecture has no room in the reception in contemplation. For that reason, Benjamin says that there are historical points at which the human apparatus of perception is faced with stimuli which cannot be confronted by optical means alone. These stimuli or apperceptions are rather mastered through habit and, therefore, are first introduced by tactile means. Film, especially because of its shock effects, is predisposed to this type of reception. As the reception of film is not one of contemplation, Benjamin demands that it be thought of in the light of 'the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics.'[127] Benjamin wants to rescue the original Greek word for aesthetics, *aisthēsis* (αἴσθησις), which means 'perception, sensation.' In *De Anima* (4$^{th}$ century B.C.), Aristotles defined *aisthēsis* as concerning all perception. *Aisthēsis* may also be a form of perception, a sense, and the sense-object falling under it.[128] Thus, this term stands for perception with all the senses, as well as for the impressions that such perception leaves on the body.[129] In the mid-

[125] This type of reception has been qualified in more recent literature on media and embodied experience as 'haptic optics.' In fact, as I will comment later, Riegl ended up using the word haptic instead of tactile.
[126] Aloïs Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. by Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985), p.22.
[127] 'Work of Art,' first version, p.34; second version, p.120.
[128] J. O. Urmson, *The Greek Philosophical Vocabulary* (London: Duckworth, 1990), pp. 13, 14.
[129] It is no accident that Jacques Rancière has entitled his most recent book precisely *Aisthesis*. Through a series of scenes, Rancière shows the process by which a regime of perception, sensation and interpretation of art is constituted and transformed. According to

eighteenth century, Alexander Baumgarten introduced the term aesthetics—first in his *Metaphysics* (1742) and then more broadly in his *Aesthetica* (1750)—to refer to the whole region of human perception and sensation, as the original Greek term implied. For him, the aesthetic realm mediates between the abstract sphere of reason and the body-bound particulars of sense.[130] However, the concept increasingly lost its original meaning to centre instead on a supra-sensorial reception of beauty.

In his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel recognised that the concept 'aesthetics' meant precisely the science of sensation, of feeling. For him, this conception was unsatisfactory and inadequate to the science he was trying to establish, which was concerned with the beauty of art. Hegel thought that a concept that focused on the feelings that a work of art produced was superficial. Thus, to avoid misunderstandings, he presented his project as a philosophy of fine art.[131] Before Hegel, Kant had already reflected on aesthetics within the turn to the subject inherent to his philosophy. Thus, in his third critique, he placed the judgement of taste in the subject, who 'speaks of beauty *as if it were* a quality of the object.'[132] In this way, the subject demands the agreement of the others and claims universality for such a judgement. However, despite this aesthetic quality being dependant on the subject and not on the object, Kant disclaims the role of the senses in this judgement and argues that no pure judgement of taste, i.e. a pure aesthetic judgement, should be grounded on sensation. As Terry Eagleton has put it, 'Kant's turn to the subject is hardly a turn to the *body*.' Corporeal needs and desires are disinterested for Kant and, therefore, fall outside of aesthetic taste. Hence, the Kantian approach to art ends up being 'a "subjective" but non-sensuous aesthetics.'[133] Therefore, both Kant and Hegel situated aesthetics at a distance from the human body, in a middle way between its materiality and the abstraction of reason.

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him, the term 'aisthesis' designates the mode of experience through which 'we perceive very diverse things, whether in their techniques of production or their destination, as all belonging to art.' Thus, *aisthesis* 'concerns the sensible fabric of experience within which they are produced.' This entails not only the material conditions, but also modes of perception and regimes of emotion. Therefore, Rancière is, like Benjamin, concerned with the transformation of our mode of perception. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. by Zakir Paul (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p.x.

[130] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.15.

[131] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. by F.P.B. Osmaston (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1920), pp.1, 2.

[132] Kant, Op. Cit., p.44 (my italics).

[133] Eagleton, p.21. Italics in the original.

For Schiller, the role of aesthetics was to bring feelings and passions into harmony with reason by depriving them of their dynamic power (i.e. their pure physical nature) and to reconcile the laws of reason with the interests of the senses by depriving reason of its moral compulsion. Aesthetics is thus envisaged by Schiller as a sphere of freedom located in a medium and transitory stage from the passive state of feeling to the active state of thinking and willing. For Schiller, some senses are still attached to the natural state in which human beings are driven by their natural feelings and instincts; however, there are other senses able to raise human beings from that state to the aesthetic state. In the twenty-sixth letter from *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller rejects the sense of touch, while advocating the role of the eye and the ear. For Schiller, the senses of sight and audition are placed in a privileged position. He considers that nature has gifted human beings with two senses, sight and audition, with which they can grasp knowledge of the real world through semblance alone. In this way, humans have been raised from reality to semblance. In other words, it is through semblance that humanity has entered into culture. Touch, in contrast, is an animal sense with which we have direct contact with objects and thus with reality.

> The object of touch is a force to which we are subjected; the object of eye and ear a form that we engender. As long as man is still a savage he enjoys by means of these tactile senses alone, and at this stage the senses of semblance are merely the servants of these. Either he does not rise to the level of seeing at all, or he is at all events not satisfied with it. Once he does begin to enjoy through the eye, and seeing acquires for him a value of its own, he is already aesthetically free and the play-drive [*Spieltrieb*] has started to develop.[134]

As I argue above, Schiller claimed that through aesthetics, human beings distance themselves from the constraints of physical necessities and natural forces. For Schiller, through play we are free of constraints, both from physical necessities (our corporeal, animal needs) and moral laws. The difference here is the role that Benjamin and Schiller confer on the senses in aesthetic experience. For the latter, the sense of touch was associated with the natural state and was characteristic of savages.

[134] Schiller, p.195.

By contrast, seeing was conceived as civilised.[135] For Benjamin, on the contrary, the sense of touch allows human beings to experiment and, therefore, play. In this way, they escape from the enslavement to the fateful forces of 'first nature,' which are also present in 'first technology.' Thus, Benjamin remarks that the *taktisch* quality of a 'second technology' such as film enlarges the 'room for play'—to the detriment, that much is sure, of semblance.[136]

Riegl lamented that modern art, and modern art theory, led people to suppose that the absorption of a work of art was only possible through the sense of sight.[137] For Riegl, in art reception there is always a combination of optical and tactile stimuli. However, whereas Riegl used the term *taktisch* to deepen the understanding of the production and reception of specific artworks, Benjamin made use of it in order to analyse a different kind of reception which, having a predominantly *taktisch* quality, did not permit the spectators to be absorbed into the screen, but rather to absorb the image into themselves. Tobias Wilke has recently stressed the importance of the *taktische Qualität* of film for Benjamin in his article 'Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses.' Wilke argues that 'by inscribing a tactile element into the heart of the optical sphere, the experience of film establishes an entirely new perceptual constellation.'[138] Benjamin introduced the *taktisch* quality of film in relation to the Dadaists. For him, Dadaists had turned the artwork into a missile that jolted the viewer with a *taktisch* quality. Benjamin thought that film, with its changes of scene and focus, also had a percussive, tactile effect on the spectators. Benjamin described the shock effects of film by comparing them with the contemplation of a painting. The image of a film screen changes quickly and, therefore, the train of associations of the viewer is immediately interrupted by new images; by contrast, the painting invites contemplation, because the viewer can give in to his or her own train of associations. Film is thus the art form which best renders the shock effects which the urban masses have to face in

[135] Diane Morgan has already brought up this fragment by Schiller in connection with Benjamin's polarity between play and semblance (*Spiel/Schein*) in '*Spielraum* et *Greifbarkeit*: Un acheminement vers une architecture utopique,' in Libero Andreotti, ed., *Spielraum: W. Benjamin et l'architecture* (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2011), pp. 291-301.
[136] 'Work of Art,' SW3, n127.
[137] Aloïs Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, trans. by Jacqueline E. Jung (New York: Zone Books, 2004), p.341.
[138] Tobias Wilke, 'Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses,' in *Grey Room*, no. 39, p.47.

their everyday lives.[139] For Benjamin, both film and Dadaism provided a tactile impression on the viewers. The difference is that the latter had isolated this *taktisch* quality only for the purpose of revolting against morals, whereas film has generalised this *taktisch* quality. Following Riegl, Benjamin argued that the *taktisch* reception was created by habit and it took the form of 'casual noticing,' rather than 'attentive observation.'[140] Thus, Benjamin defined the typical state of film spectators, who conceive the film as entertainment, as 'reception of distraction' (*Zerstreuung*). In this new mode of reception of artworks, the body was increasingly more directly addressed and, therefore, Benjamin thought that there was no longer any room for a traditional conception of aesthetics.

There is another point to this aesthetic theory which I have not yet addressed. The term used by Benjamin to refer to the tactile element of film is *taktisch*, which means both tactile and tactical. Riegl used this word originally in his *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901). However, as early as 1902, Riegl discarded the term *taktisch* as ambiguous and opted for *haptisch*, which, according to him, better conveyed the idea of expressing tactile qualities by optical means. This is one of the reasons why the editors of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* decided to change the word *taktisch* to *taktil*.[141] Nonetheless, with this change, the polysemic meaning of the word *taktisch* was lost.[142] This polysemy was especially important for the inclusion of film within the debates of the avant-garde and for its political function. As I will try to argue in

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[139] Benjamin develops the sort of stimuli which the city-dweller has to face in modernity more deeply in his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.'

[140] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.120.

[141] The other reason is that Benjamin authorised the French translation '*tactile*' in the only version of the essay published in Benjamin's lifetime. However, in French the words *tactile* (tactile) and *tactique* (tactical) render two different meanings and, therefore, the translator Pierre Klossowski had to choose one in detriment of the other.

[142] This double meaning of the word *taktisch* has always been controversial in German thought. For example, Erwin Panofsky, connected theoretically to both Riegl and Benjamin, was horrified by the multiple meaning of many words used in German art history; among them he cites primarily the word *taktisch*: 'the German language unfortunately permits a fairly trivial thought to declaim from behind a woollen curtain of apparent profundity and, conversely, a multitude of meanings to lurk behind one term. The word *taktisch*, for example, normally denting "tactical" as opposed to "strategic," is used in art-historical German as an equivalent of "tactile" or even "textural" as well as "tangible" or "palpable."' Erwin Panofsky, 'Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European,' in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (New York: Anchor Books, 1955), pp.329, 330. See also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. by John Goodman (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p.xxv.

my thesis, the historical role Benjamin ascribed to film was to (re)appropriate modern technology on the part of the proletariat in order to create a collective techno-*physis*. The tactical sense of film, both as preventive of the psycho-body consequences of a military disaster and as a means to gain control of that collective body, should be understood in its full political meaning. On the other hand, Benjamin always thought that a political use of film should be made through a refunctioning (*Umfunktionierung)* of the medium itself. The political tactics to transform media and make use of them for revolutionary purposes were, therefore, better conveyed through the term *taktisch* than *taktil*. Benjamin presented this tactical refunctioning of the medium most prominently in the essay 'The Author as Producer' (1934), although it is also present in the texts on radio and particularly in the 'Work of Art' essay. The aim of refunctioning these media was basically to adapt—in an empowering, therapeutic reception—these new technologies to the collective body formed by the masses, who could understand their collective nature much better through a technologically mediated representation. Film was the most exemplary medium in this regard, especially some Soviet films which Benjamin saw during his stay in Moscow. In the very same process of reception, cinema was shaping a collective body which received energy from the film and could innervate it through the new, emerging body. The relevance of Benjamin's theories on film, analysed from the point of view of his anthropological materialism, is that he understood that the relationship of the audience with the art form had become more corporeal and a purely contemplative absorption into the work of art was no longer possible. For this reason, I argue that Benjamin's approach to cinema was concerned first and foremost with the new aesthetics brought about by film. Hence, his writings on the topic could be conceived of as 'film aesthetics.' This concept focuses not only on issues of representation and the medium—as film theory—but also on the new spatial coordinates between the body of the audience and the art form.

## Chapter 2

## Soviet Film: The Giant Laboratory of Technological Innervation

Walter Benjamin published his first texts devoted to film in the pages of the journal *Die literarische Welt* in March 1927. These articles, 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film' and 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' analysed the situation of film in the context of the changes taking place in revolutionary Russia. Benjamin wrote them after his stay in Moscow from 9th December 1926 to 1st February 1927. These texts started to address some primary questions about the technological nature of this new art form and the politicisation of art. They can therefore be conceived as Benjamin's first attempts to theorise the historical role of film and to assess the juncture between art and technology. The aim of this chapter is to analyse these early writings on film in connection with his ongoing concern regarding the creation of a collective body in technology and with his later theories on the film apparatus developed more broadly in the 'Work of Art' essay. The chapter will also analyse Benjamin's theories on technology in relation to the use and reception of modern technology in the Soviet Union. The primary intention of this chapter is to analyse in depth these two articles on Soviet film which have often been overlooked, especially 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film.'[1] I will argue that these two texts provide valuable insights into Benjamin's conception of film technology and anticipate many important themes of essays such as 'The Author as Producer' and the 'Work of Art.' A close reading of these two articles will hopefully offer a more thorough understanding of Benjamin's view of film and of the role played by cinema in the early days of the Soviet Union.

[1] Howard Eiland's and Michael W. Jenning's recent biography *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* is an exception, for they read these two texts together and in relation to the 'Work of Art' essay. They argue that in these two articles, Benjamin 'outlines a film aesthetic that shares salient features with his theory of literary criticism.' Eiland and Jenning conceive Benjamin's writings on film as 'film aesthetic,' from a very similar perspective to my view. Their book does not, however, provide a detailed analysis of these or any other articles. Hence, my analysis, which resembles some basic points in their approach, will go into more detail. See Eiland and Jenning, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), pp.275- 277.

The reception of Soviet film in the Weimar Republic provoked many varied responses, involving people from the left and from the right, from journalists, intellectuals and film theorists.[2] Aesthetics and politics were the subject of intense debate, especially after the release of *Battleship Potemkin* (Bronenosets Potemkin, dir. Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1925), which premiered in a cut version in Berlin on 29th April 1926. One of the first reviews of the film came from Siegfried Kracauer, who published a passionately positive review of the film. Kracauer declared that *Potemkin* presented 'something fundamentally different,' 'a moment of revolution,' achieved by means purely cinematographic.[3] The debate went on for months and Benjamin intervened at a relatively late stage. The discussion between Benjamin and Oscar A. H. Schmitz in a special number of *Die literarische Welt* about 'The New Russia' was published on the 11th March 1927, nearly one year after the release of the film.[4] The weekly literary journal *Die literarische Welt*, published by Rowohlt Verlag, had become since 1925 the main platform for Benjamin to develop his journalistic work. He contributed regularly to this journal, publishing such influential essays as 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,' 'On the Image of Proust,' 'Little History of Photography,' and a number of reviews of books, apart from his brief incursion into film criticism with these two articles and the review of Charlie Chaplin's *The Circus* (1928). The editor of the journal, Willy Haas, had commissioned Benjamin to reply to an article written by the playwright and essayist Oscar A. H. Schmitz on *Potemkin*. This article criticised Eisenstein's film

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[2] See Miriam Hansen, '"Of Lightning Rods, Prisms, and Forgotten Scissors": *Potemkin* and German Film Theory,' in *New German Critique*, no. 95, special issue for David Bathrick (Spring-Summer, 2005), pp.162-179.

[3] Originally in Siegfried Kracauer, 'Die Jupiterlampen brennen weiter: Zur Frankfurter Aufführung es Potemkin-Films,' *Frankfurter Zeitung*, May 16, 1926. In Hansen, '*Potemkin* and German Film Theory,' pp.172, 173.

[4] The same day Kracauer published the first part of the collection of articles 'The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies,' which Benjamin defined as a 'political exposure' as well as 'sociological detection.' In *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol.3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), p.248; and Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p.82. In this article, Kracauer reviewed some popular films to prove the political exploitation of social critique by film capital. The aim of these films was, according to Kracauer, to safeguard prevailing society by exploiting the daydreams and wishes of society, ensuring always that any critique remained within the realms of the established order. Kracauer claimed that the excitement that *Potemkin* raised in Germany came precisely because this film showed the present in historical guise, implying the destruction of the bourgeoisie, instead of reaffirming the status of the ruling class as both American and German films did. Kracauer, 'The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies,' in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

for being marred by its political tendency and by its self-proclaimed status as a collective work. Benjamin had not seen the film before he left for Moscow. Nevertheless, Haas probably thought that his response to the film would be positive and devastating towards Schmitz's article, as indeed it proved to be. Benjamin's article, under the heading of 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' provided not only a positive review of *Battleship Potemkin,* but also a defence of the film medium and the new possibilities it offered. In the same issue of the journal, Benjamin also published the article 'The Political Groupings of Russian Writers.' This text analysed the different cultural groups which had been formed in the Soviet Union according to their relation to the state's policy, to their political stance and, consequently, to the position they took in the debates on content and form.

Benjamin went to Moscow in December 1926 following his lover Asja Lacis and stayed there for nearly two months. In that time, he was able to have an overview of the new revolutionary Russia (which was, nevertheless, insufficient for Lacis, who maintained that he did not know the country well enough, in part because he could not speak Russian).[5] Benjamin found the situation in Russia contradictory and was disappointed by some results of the October Revolution. He perceived that the Soviet state was pursuing peace both with imperialist states and within its own population, which led to the de-politicisation of Russian lives as much as possible. At the same time, the young pioneers in the Komsomol were educated in revolution only as a discourse and not as experience. In short, it seemed to Benjamin more a period of restoration than of revolution.[6] Asja Lacis accused Benjamin of not knowing Russia properly and of not understanding something essential to theorising the role of Soviet film: that at that moment a conversion was taking place from revolutionary to technological effort. Lacis stated that it was made clear 'to every communist that at this hour revolutionary work does not signify conflict or civil war, but rather electrification, canal construction, creation of factories.' However, Benjamin lamented the absence of a more critical, but also utopian, approach to technology.

[5] Benjamin recognised that because of his ignorance of the Russian language, he was unable to approach more than a narrow slice of life. This restriction led him to focus less on a visual than a rhythmic experience of the country: 'an experience in which an archaic Russian tempo blends into a whole with the new rhythms of the Revolution, an experience which, by Western standards, I discovered to be far more incommensurable than I had expected.' In a letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal from 5 June 1927, in 'Moscow Diary,' in *October*, vol. 35, special issue 'Moscow Diary' (Winter, 1985), p.134.
[6] Ibid., p.53.

Thus, he replied to Lacis by talking about Scheerbart, since 'no other author had so clearly emphasized the revolutionary character of technological achievement.'[7]

As I have argued in the previous chapter, Scheerbart's vision of technology was especially exemplary for Benjamin. In his novels, Scheerbart had depicted a successful interaction between technology and humanity. This relationship had been achieved because technology had been put to humane ends and thus humanity had discarded the notion that the only role of technology was the exploitation of nature. In this way, Scheerbart had understood that technology's aim was to emancipate not only human beings, but the whole of creation itself. Benjamin also brought up Scheerbart in an interview for the daily evening newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva.* In the interview he talked about Italian art and German literature. He put special emphasis on Scheerbart and his conception of technology:

> His books are utopian-cosmological novels in which the problem of interplanetary relations is tracked down and humans are represented as the creators of an ideal technology. The novels are saturated with the pathos of technology, a pathos of machines that is entirely new and unaccustomed for literature, yet which is far from displaying social meaning, since Scheerbart's heroes seek the harmony of the world and since the creation of machines is of importance for them not for economic reasons, but rather as the proof of certain ideal truths.[8]

For Benjamin, the ideal technology created by Scheerbart's characters was dissociated from the direct economic purposes to which technology is commonly reduced. Technology should serve human beings in the search for ideal truths, as in the building of the Tower in the asteroid Pallas in *Lesabéndio*. After the interview, Reich was worried about Benjamin's answer regarding Scheerbart and told him that his expostulations had laid him open to attack.[9] Benjamin was also upset about his answers to a certain degree. However, he was not worried about having mentioned

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[7] Ibid., p.82.
[8] In *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.7, part 2, p.880. Translated by Colin Sample in Uwe Steiner, 'The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political,' *New German Critique*, no. 83, Special Issue on Walter Benjamin (Spring-Summer, 2001), pp.75-76.
[9] 'Moscow Diary,' p.31.

Scheerbart, but because of the imprecise nature of his formulation.[10] For Benjamin, the creatures of *Lesabéndio* could teach revolutionary Russians how they should incorporate technology into their lives. Hence, he wanted to emphasise in the interview the (truly) revolutionary potential of technology. I will argue in this chapter that the reception of technology in the Soviet Union differed in many aspects from that advocated by Benjamin.

In the nearly two months that Benjamin was in Moscow, he frequented many cultural events and was able to assess the cultural atmosphere of the time. Due in particular to the influence of Lacis and her partner Bernhard Reich, he mostly attended theatre performances. Nonetheless, he had the chance to watch a few Russian films. As may be deduced from Benjamin's first reactions to these films in his *Moscow Diary*, he did not appreciate many of them. Therefore, it is hard to argue that Benjamin's positive remarks on the film medium are first and foremost directed at Soviet film, as many authors maintain. Certainly, he liked Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mother* (Mat, 1926). However, he did not afford the same laudatory remarks to other films. For example, Benjamin described Lev Kuleshov's *By the Law* (Po zakonu, 1926) as being technically good but with an absurd plot.[11] He described an unnamed film of which, at the time he went to Moscow, it was said 'would outdo the success of Potemkin' as 'an unbearable botch,' projected 'at such a dizzying speed that it was impossible to watch or understand.'[12] On Dziga Vertov's *One-Sixth of the World* (Shestaya chast mira, 1926), Benjamin acknowledged: 'there was much that escaped me.'[13] Although Vertov is commonly associated with the type of films hailed by Benjamin, his review of the film in 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film' is not very positive. Special attention should be paid to the two Soviet comedies that Benjamin saw and abhorred. Both films starred the comic actor Igor Iljinsky, who was described by Benjamin as 'an unscrupulous, inept imitator of Chaplin.'[14] The first was described as 'terrible,' although Benjamin did not mention the title of the film.[15] The second was Yakov Protazanov's detective comedy *The*

[10] Ibid., p.81.
[11] Ibid., p.28.
[12] Ibid., pp.31, 32.
[13] Ibid., p.69.
[14] Ibid., p.54.
[15] This film was probably *The Tailor from Torzhok* (Zakroyshchik iz Torzhka, dir. Yakov Protazanov, 1925).

*Trial of the Three Million* (Protsess o tryokh millionakh, 1926). In total, Benjamin saw only seven films, certainly not an adequate number to accurately judge the whole of Russian film production. Nonetheless, the observations that he made were linked to other cultural factors he perceived in Russian life and were informed by conversations with other cultural figures on issues of production, distribution and reception. It is important, in any case, to bear in mind the films that Benjamin saw in order to assess his reflections on Soviet film. Often this fact is disregarded and, therefore, such analyses are not totally accurate. As a matter of fact, Benjamin was never a connoisseur of film and less so of Soviet cinema. Hence, he was not even able to recognise the important formal and stylistic divergences among the most important directors of the time: Pudovkin, Eisenstein and Vertov. These authors were holding intense debates about the film form in that period, but at no time did Benjamin pay attention to them.

### 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film'

'On the Present Situation of Russian Film' was, along with 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' the first text that Benjamin devoted entirely to film. This article is particularly important for the present discussion not only because of his view on Soviet film, but also because he reflects on the reception of technology in the Soviet Union. Benjamin starts the article by developing a critical review of the state of Soviet cinema at the time. Thus, he analyses the production and reception of films in the country, the favourite themes and the problems which, according to him, Soviet films should address. Benjamin argues that good foreign films are rarely seen in Russia because they are very expensive. He claims that the greatest achievements of Soviet film are easier to see in Berlin than in Moscow, because the standards of judgement in Russia are very different to those in Germany and, besides, Russians are very uncritical of their own films. Benjamin writes that film in Soviet Russia is the art in which censorship is governed by the strictest controls, especially with regard to the choice of subject matter. He regrets that the main themes are now those of internal pacification, instead of propagandistic ones. As we have already seen, he wrote in his *Moscow Diary* that the country seemed to be heading toward a period of restoration, instead of one of revolution. For this very reason, Benjamin argues that

the best Soviet films are those which deal with the October Revolution. By contrast, he assesses Russian comedies as irrelevant. As I have mentioned above, his appreciation of the famous Russian comic actor Igor Iljinsky was anything but positive. Benjamin laments that Russians are unaware of the existence of many good foreign films. He is especially concerned about the scarce, declining import of American slapstick in the Soviet Union. He thought that Russians, because of their passionate interest in technical matters, would enjoy slapstick comedy, since technology is its main target. These films, he argued, would produce a salutary, therapeutic function in the state process of industrialisation of the country. The problem, however, is that the new Russian does not appreciate 'irony and scepticism in technical matters.'[16] According to Benjamin, Bolshevik society required the success of a new social comedy, similar to that of Chaplin, in order to develop a healthier, alternative relationship to technology.

Most of the Soviet films of the time, however, promoted an uncritical reception of technology and the principles of Taylorism were praised rather than criticised. Icons of scientific management and capitalism such as John Ford were highly idealised. In films as famous as Vertov's *One-Sixth of the World* and Eisenstein's *The General Line* (Staroye i novoye, 1929) all the tractors which appear as heroes of the modernisation of Russia are of the model Fordson.[17] Thus, film also adopted, even in the best cases, the principles of what Adorno called 'boy-meets-tractor literature.'[18] When Benjamin was in Moscow, Vertov's *One-Sixth of the World* had recently been released and he had the chance to see the film in the cinema Arbat. Eisenstein's *The General Line* was still in production, but Benjamin heard about the film and reflected on its use of actors. In 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film' Benjamin analysed Vertov's film, basing his critique on the representation of the relationship of Russian people to their means of production. Benjamin starts this analysis by arguing that the film, in his opinion, has failed to reach its self-imposed challenge of showing how the vast regions of the Soviet Union have changed under the new social order. He

[16] 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.2, part 1, 1927-1930 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.15.
[17] 24,000 Fordson tractors, approximately eighty five percent of the total Soviet production, had been imported from Detroit by 1926. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.148.
[18] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Reconciliation under Duress,' in Ernst Bloch *et. al*., *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. and trans. by Ronald Taylor (London: NLB, 1977), p.173.

describes the first minutes of the film in the following terms: ‘in fractions of a second, there is a flow of images from workplaces (pistons in motion, labourers bringing in the harvest, transport works) and from capitalist places of entertainment (bars, dance halls, and clubs).’[19] These first images of the film work because, with a montage that speeds up, Vertov links the bourgeoisie and the accumulation of capital to the exploitation of workers through the machines they own and through imperialism, using the people from the colonies as slaves or as mere amusement for their spectacles. For Benjamin, the relations which are made through montage in these first minutes of film succeed in their aim, but: ‘Unfortunately, the film soon abandons this approach in favour of a description of Russian peoples and landscapes, while the link between these and their modes of production is merely hinted at in an all too shadowy fashion.’[20] As Benjamin put it in the ‘Work of Art’ essay citing Pudovkin, film was a powerful means of materialist exposition. The relation between the actor and the objects could be revealed as never before thanks to cinematic techniques. Hence Benjamin would have expected to see the depiction of the relation of human beings to machinery in different modes of production and how this relationship had changed from Czarist Russia to the new, emerging Soviet society. I will argue that the task identified by Benjamin was realised most successfully in Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (Chelovek s kino-apparatom, 1929), a film in which the position of the depicted person within the system of production and in his/her relation with the means of production is far more clear.

Benjamin defines Vertov’s film as a typical attempt to make a film straight from life, in which the apparatus is masked when shooting the amateur actors of the film. He was referring here to Vertov’s claim of catching life unaware, ‘in order to show people without masks, without makeup, to catch them through the eye of the camera in a moment when they are not acting, to read their thoughts, laid bare by the camera.’[21] In the ‘Work of Art’ essay, Benjamin repeats the idea, in what seems to be another reference to Vertov: ‘Some of the actors taking part in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray *themselves*—and primarily in their

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[19] ‘On the Present Situation of Russian Film,’ SW2, p.13.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. by Annette Michelson, trans. by Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley and Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984), p.41.

own work process.'[22] In 'Little History of Photography,' Benjamin mentioned in a subsidiary way 'the tremendous physiognomic gallery mounted by an Eisenstein or a Pudovkin,' to compare with the series of faces presented in the book *Face of Our Time* by the German photographer August Sander.[23] Thus, Benjamin recognised that the Russian feature film was the first to put faces in front of the camera which photography had hitherto had no use for. For Benjamin, 'immediately the human face appeared on film with new and immeasurable significance.'[24]

In the same line of argument, Benjamin also mentions the new film Eisenstein was recording, *The General Line*. In this film on peasant life Eisenstein was not using professional actors, but looking for the characters required from among the Russian population.[25] For the role of the film's heroine, Eisenstein could not hire a professional actress; none could milk a cow, plough or drive a tractor. He was searching for a person who could fit into the context of the film, what was coined 'typage.' For Eisenstein, this term could be broadly understood as a face without make-up; but more specifically, it means an approach to the events embraced by the content of the film in which the actors interfere as little as possible with the events related.[26] In the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin quotes Rudolf Arnheim and argues that the best effects in film interpretation are achieved by 'acting as little as possible' or rather using the actors as 'props,' chosen for their typicalness and introduced in the proper context.[27] In the footnote to this quotation, Benjamin develops the idea by giving the example of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928). He

[22] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (second version), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, volume 3, 1935-1938 (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.114. Italics in the original.
[23] 'Little History of Photography,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.2, part 2, 1931-1924 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp.519.
[24] Ibid., pp.519, 520.
[25] In his history of Soviet film, Jay Leyda reflects on the immense casting operation for the film, which swept through the cities and villages of the Soviet Union in order to bring possible faces to Eisenstein. It was not always easy to find the right face and, as was expected, the discovery of the most important face, that of the film's heroine, took longer than any other, exceeding two months. Finally, they found Marfa Lapkina, an illiterate farm labourer who worked in a state farm at Konstantinovka. Nevertheless, when he first saw *The General Line*, Leyda notes, the faces in it gave him the impression of having been found 'on the spot,' in the same places the film had been photographed. Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp.263, 264.
[26] Sergei M. Eisenstein, 'Through Theatre to Cinema,' in *Film Form*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda (London: Dennis Dobson, 1963), pp.8, 9.
[27] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.112.

notes that Dreyer spent months searching for the forty actors who interpreted the Inquisitors' tribunal, avoiding any resemblance in the age and physiognomy of the actors.[28] With this example, he developed a very similar argument to the concept of typage in Eisenstein.

Later in the article, Benjamin stresses the role of film in the construction of the country and the spread of the politics promoted by the Central Committee. During his stay in Moscow he realised how serious the Soviet state had taken the task of getting the whole population of the country closer to film technology. Benjamin defines this project of exposing all citizens to film and radio as 'the most grandiose mass-psychological experiments ever undertaken in the gigantic laboratory that Russia has become.'[29] He values these experiments as particularly positive. Benjamin is talking here—without naming it—about the process of 'cinefication' (*kinofikatsiia*) in the Soviet Union that started in the first half of the 1920s and aimed to build an infrastructure that would allow every town and village of the country to have access to cinema. 'Cinefication' was a neologism that was incorporated into early Soviet life and joined other expressions such as 'electrification' and 'radiofication' as 'indications of how modern technology promised to transform the Russian experience.'[30] In the article, Benjamin mentions the existence of cultural and educational films addressed to peasants. These films were produced in such a manner that the peasant population could understand them. Peasants were thus provided with historical, political and technical information (e.g. how to deal with plagues or use tractors) and even with hygienic and behavioural advice. These films reached their audience through travelling cinemas which arrived to even the remotest regions of the country. Although Benjamin noticed that much of this programme remained incomprehensible to the great majority, it could be useful as 'training material' for the peasant representatives. Thus, film was used as a medium through which the population of the Soviet Union could approach technology.[31] It is easy to

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[28] Ibid., n126.
[29] 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film,' SW2, p.14.
[30] Vance Kepley, Jr., '"Cinefication": Soviet Film Exhibition in the 1920s,' in *Film History*, vol.6 (1994), p.262.
[31] In her book *Visions of a New Land* Emma Widdis analyses this process of bringing cinema to all regions of the emerging state in order to integrate the population into a new concept of citizenship. She writes that in 1925 local organisations under the association of the Society for Friends of Soviet Cinema were formed with the aim of providing cinematic equipment with which to enrich the everyday life of the regions through mobile projectors. As

see in these observations Benjamin's interest in an experimental, playful interaction with technology, employed in order to socially organise a new collective body. Undoubtedly, Benjamin was aware that this body, in the case of the Soviet Union, corresponded to a national organisation constructed by the State and that the brain that discharged the energy to innervate such a body was the Central Committee. However, the Russians had understood that technology should be an element to be incorporated into the new social organisation of the country. The experiments orchestrated by the State, involving a number of intellectuals, pointed precisely to that aim; thereby giving rise to the utopian technophilia of Aleksei Gastev and Platon Kerzhentsev, among others, which revolved around the dependence of technology on humanity and the dependence of humanity on technology. In this environment of enthusiasm for the potential of technology, Benjamin wrote in his *Moscow Diary* that 'everything technical is sacred here, nothing is taken more earnestly than technique.'[32] Certainly, Benjamin lamented the uncritical reception of technology in the Soviet Union. Thus, although he valued these mass-psychological experiments as positive, he also observed the problems caused by such an uncritical adoption of technology by the Soviet state. In the next section I will develop a Benjaminian critique of the conception and reception of technology in the Soviet Union by placing his interpretation of technology within the broader debates on this topic in the Marxist tradition.

## Questions about Technology

In the section 'Fire Alarm' in *One-Way Street*, Benjamin presents the technological and economic development led by the bourgeoisie as being on course for catastrophe. If the proletariat does not perform an emergency intervention, says Benjamin, everything will be lost. According to him, the economic situation of contemporary

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Benjamin notes in his article, peasants were important targets in this process of cinefication. Thus, an issue of the official journal *Soviet Cinema* claimed that 'the kinofikatsiia of the village [was] a key task for Soviet construction.' For the next fifteen years, the production of films made for peasants—among them the type of films that Benjamin talked about, on the use of tractors, hygienic education to take care of animals or health issues for the farmers—grew in the form of film series or cinematic experiments. Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp.13-16.

[32] 'Moscow Diary,' pp.54, 55.

Germany, with its high rates of unemployment and economic inflation, and the use of poison-gas warfare in the First World War are signs of the catastrophic ‘end of three thousand years of cultural development.’[33] Benjamin thus calls for the technical intervention of the true politician, who should break with this cultural, technological and economic development which can only lead to catastrophe. Hence, he urges the proletariat to put an end to the history of civilisation defended by the ruling class. As Benjamin writes in a note accompanying the theses ‘On the Concept of History,’ revolutions are not, as Marx said, the locomotive of world history, but ‘an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.’ [34] Michael Löwy argues that Benjamin, with this argument, ‘does not conceive the proletarian revolutions as the “natural” or “inevitable” result of economic and technical “progress” (the vulgar semipositivist axiom shared by many Marxists at the time) but as the critical *interruption* of an evolution leading to catastrophe.’[35] From this line of argument, one could argue that Benjamin demanded that the Soviet revolution put an end to the course of such cultural, economic and technological development.

However, Taylorist and Fordist principles—that is, models of the technological organisation of labour which were emblematic of contemporary capitalist development—were adopted in the Soviet Union early on in order to improve the efficiency and organisation of labour. In the early years of the revolution, critiques were raised that denounced Taylorism as exploitative. However, as early as 1921, the first conference on Taylorism was organised and, as Richard Stites describes, ‘quickly settled on the name Scientific Organization of Labor (*Nauchnaya organizatsiya truda*, or N.O.T.) in order to expunge the exploitative connotation of the word.’[36] Lenin advocated the adoption of Taylorism in the Soviet Union as an instrument that would improve the lives of the workers, while maximising productivity. The enthusiasm for Taylorism brought with it an equal devotion to

[33] ‘One-Way Street,’ *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings,* vol.1, 1913-1926 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.469.
[34] ‘Paralipomena to the Theses on the Concept of History,’ *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings,* vol.4, 1938-1940 (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.402.
[35] Michael Löwy, ‘Fire Alarm: Walter Benjamin’s Critique of Technology,’ in Richard B. Day, Ronald Beiner and Joseph Masciulli, eds., *Democratic Theory and Technological Society* (Armond, New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1988), p.274. Italics in the original.
[36] Stites, p.147.

Ford and his techniques. The Soviet state not only imported tractors and cars, but also factory layouts and specialists from Detroit. Eight versions of Henry Ford's biography, *My Life*, were translated and published in the Soviet Union during the twenties. In addition, Stites argues, the words *fordizatsiya* and *teilorizatsiya* became familiar among the Soviet population to denote good work habits.[37]

The understanding of technology as 'scientific rationality' and, therefore, as an objective, neutral category—a theory known as 'technicism' or 'objectivism'—has been a longstanding problem in Marxist thought. Marx was undoubtedly not so one-sided with regard to technology as to concede it an objective rationality, but he left many questions concerning technology unanswered, such as whether the nature of modern technology is affected by its capitalist origin or, on the contrary, is a neutral instrument which can be used either in a capitalist or a communist manner.[38] In the absence of a critique, Monika Reinfelder argues that Marxism produced 'its own brand of bourgeois ideology under the grand title of the "dialectic of history".'[39] In his *Dialectics of Nature*, Friedrich Engels attempted to abstract general laws from the development of nature in order to establish his principle of dialectics, which according to him would be valid for understanding, not only the theoretical natural sciences, but also the development of thought and society.[40] According to this conception, technology is understood within an evolutionist scheme in which its transcendental goal is 'the perfection of man's technical mastery of nature.'[41] Thus, in Engels' dialectical materialism technology appears in the indeterminate form of man's objective knowledge of natural laws. For Engels, technological development is manifested in specific modes of production. These modes of production, however,

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[37] Ibid., p.148.
[38] Michael Löwy asks himself this question in relation to Benjamin's conception of technology in 'Fire Alarm: Walter Benjamin's Critique of Technology,' p.273.
[39] Monika Reinfelder, 'Introduction: Breaking the Spell of Technicism,' in Phil Slater, ed., *Outlines of a Critique of Technology* (London: Ink Links, 1980), pp.11, 12.
[40] Engels presents his development of dialectics as follows: 'We are not concerned here with writing a handbook of dialectics, but only with showing that the dialectical laws are really laws of development of nature, and therefore are valid also for theoretical natural science.' As a conclusion of the introduction to the natural laws of dialectics, after proving that these laws are in chemistry, Engels defends this theory by stating that 'to have formulated for the first time in its universally valid form a general law of development of nature, society, and thought, will always remain an act of historic importance.' Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, ed. and trans. by Clemens Dutt (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1940), pp.27 and 34.
[41] Reinfelder, p.12.

do not determine such development. On the contrary, it is the objective technological development which determines and ultimately transcends the different modes of production.[42]

In 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,' Benjamin criticises Engels for endowing the natural sciences with an objective nature and compares this with the Social Democratic approach to the educational problem in the nineteenth-century. German Social Democrats believed that the proletariat would be able to free itself from the domination of the bourgeoisie with the same knowledge that the bourgeoisie produced to secure its domination over the proletariat. According to Benjamin, this view is particularly problematical because the bourgeoisie produced knowledge with no access to practice and, especially in the case of the humanities, quite unrelated to economics, and therefore could teach proletarians nothing about their situation as a class. Benjamin criticises Engels for his belief that, thanks to technology, we could finally recognise 'things-in-themselves,' thus refuting Kant's system of thought. Lukács had criticised Engels for the same reason in 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (it is very likely that Benjamin took up this critique from him). There Lukács says that Engels misunderstood Hegel, for whom 'the terms "in itself" and "for us" are by no means opposites,' but rather 'necessary correlatives.'[43] Lukács also claims that Engels misinterpreted Kant's epistemology when he presented the problem of the thing-in-itself as 'a barrier to the possible concrete expansion of our knowledge.'[44] The deepest misunderstanding, though, says Lukács, is his belief that scientific experiments and industry are practices through which we can finally grasp that 'thing-in-itself,' as if industry were a purely rational product which can objectively serve our purposes. Benjamin continues his critique of this technicist conception of technology in Engels and the German Social Democrats and, to refute their view, claims that 'Technology … is obviously not a purely scientific development. It is at the same time a historical one.'[45] The positivism of the technicist perspective failed to account for the fact that the 'questions that

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[42] Bertolt Brecht suggested to Benjamin that Engels' 'regrettable' turn to natural science was due to the dissolution of the First International and Marx and Engels's subsequent break with the praxis of the workers' movement. 'Diary Entries, 1938,' SW3, pp.337, 338.
[43] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p.132.
[44] Ibid.
[45] 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,' SW3, p.266.

humanity brings to nature are in part conditioned by the level of production.'[46] Therefore, these theorists overlooked the fact that this technological development was conditioned by capitalism and that it therefore not only implied the progress of natural science, but also 'the concomitant retrogression of society.'[47] For Benjamin, technology does not contain an objective rationality, but rather embodies features of the contemporary mode of production. And, insofar as this technology has been conceived under and for capitalist purposes, it will reproduce the same forms of exploitation. Benjamin denounces the Social Democrats—he could also have included the vulgar Marxists—because in this state of affairs the process of adaptation of the proletariat to technology became more and more precarious. Benjamin blames Engels's 'dialectical materialism' for this because it hides the destructive side of technological development.

Benjamin argues that the nineteenth century was not yet aware of the destructive energies of technology. This was characterised by the bungled reception of technology and the efforts of a number of authors to overlook the fact that technology served society 'only by producing commodities.'[48] Among these attempts, Benjamin cites the industrial poetry of the Saint-Simonians, the realism of Du Camp and his vision of the locomotive as the saint of the future and, finally, the poet Ludwig Pfau, who, similarly, placed trains above angels. According to Benjamin, they all failed to see that this technological development was thoroughly class conditioned.

These ideas, however, prevailed in certain trends of the Marxist tradition. For example, the Austrian Social Democrat Karl Kautsky claimed that class contradictions could not be contained within technology itself. In this way, Kautsky placed technology beyond any possible critique and paved the way for the adoption of capitalist machinery in countries which had started on the road to socialism. These ideas were deepened when introduced into Bolshevism by Georgi Plekhanov, who reduced Marx's ideas to an 'economic determinism' in which natural science was conceded an absolute autonomy.[49] In 1921 Nikolai Bukharin took this conception

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] In *Moscow Diary*, Benjamin characterised Plekhanov's universalist method as idealistic and undialectical. In a discussion with Reich, who was also very disappointed with

further by introducing it into official Soviet discourse in *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, which conceived of Marxism as technological determinism, and which Benjamin criticised for its 'unmethodological universality and immediacy' and its 'totally idealistic, metaphysical questions.'[50] Bukharin claims that 'the relations between people in the labor process are determined by the stage of advance in the evolution of technology.'[51] In a similar way to Engels, Bukharin argues that objective technological development determines social relations. In 1925, Lukács wrote a short essay in which he attacks Bukharin's method of using natural sciences as a model with which to analyse society and history. According to Lukács, Bukharin's emphasis on a false 'objectivity' in his theoretical analysis could only lead to fetishism. Lukács thought that Bukharin attributed to technology an overly determinant position in history, arguing by contrast that, while technique is a very important part of the forces of production, it cannot be identical with them nor the absolute moment of the changes of such forces. He claims, therefore, that the development of productive forces determines the development of technology and this, in turn, retroactively influences the productive forces. For that reason, he thinks that it is incorrect and unmarxist to propose for technology 'a self-sufficiency from the economic structure of society.'[52] Lukács concludes his criticism of Bukharin by accusing his philosophy of 'contemplative materialism,' because:

> instead of making a historical-materialist critique of the natural sciences and their methods, i.e. revealing them as products of capitalist development, he extends these methods to the study of society without hesitation, uncritically, unhistorically and undialectically.[53]

As I showed in the previous chapter, Benjamin characterised Bukharin's materialism as metaphysical and mechanical and criticised its alleged objectification, which

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Plekhanov, Benjamin opposed dialectical and universalist modes of representation. Thus, whereas dialectics is able to penetrate into the interior of the object with the synthesis of its triadic structure and represent the universe via the object, the universalist method—in its effort to represent what is general—ignores the object and is, therefore, nonmaterialist. *Moscow Diary*, p.38.

[50] Ibid., p.39.

[51] Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (New York: Internal Publishers, 1925), p.138.

[52] Georg Lukács, 'Technology and Social Relations,' in *New Left Review*, no.39 (September-October, 1966), p.30.

[53] Ibid., pp.33, 34.

Bukharin claimed to be founded on science. Benjamin, by contrast, preferred to develop his own brand of materialism by affirming the centrality of the physical human body—both individually and collectively. Thus, his anthropological materialism was, on the one hand, more corporeal and material and, on the other, more rooted in history than the metaphysical abstractions of Bukharin.

In this environment, theoretically grounded on the ideas of Plekhanov and Bukharin, Lenin did not hesitate to adopt Taylorism as a more developed and efficient productive method which could be adapted to communist ends. In 'The Immediate Task of the Soviet Government,' from April 1918, Lenin argued that the Soviet Republic should apply 'much of what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system.'[54] For him, the Taylor system was the last word of capitalism in the organisation of labour. Like all capitalist progress, Lenin argued that Taylorism was a combination of bourgeois exploitation and great scientific achievements. According to him, the possibility of building socialism depended exactly on the 'success in combining the Soviet power and the Soviet organisation of administration with the up-to-date achievements of capitalism.'[55] Thus, Lenin claimed that a study and teaching of the Taylor system should be organised in Russia in order to examine and adapt it to the objectives of the Soviet revolution. Trotsky, in fact, never criticised the use of Taylorism in the Soviet Union, either under Lenin or under Stalin. Writing in 1926, Trotsky argued that the socialist economy of the Soviet Union should adapt the 'conveyor principle' used by Ford. According to him, capitalism used the conveyor belt to perfect the exploitation of the worker. However, he claimed that 'this use of the conveyor is connected with capitalism, not with the conveyor itself.'[56] For this reason, Trotsky argued that the Soviet Union should not smash Fordism, but 'separate Fordism from Ford and to socialize and purge it.'[57] It is in this atmosphere that Benjamin perceives that technology in the Soviet Union has become 'sacred' and has been placed beyond any critique. This adoption of technology without any criticism was part of the contradictory situation he found in

[54] V. I. Lenin, 'The Immediate Task of the Soviet Government,' in *Collected Works*, vol. 27 (February–July, 1918) (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1965), p.258.
[55] Ibid., p.259.
[56] Leon Trotsky, 'Culture and Socialism,' *Problems of Everyday Life: Creating the Foundations for a New Society in Revolutionary Russia* (New York and London: Pathfinder, 1973), p.299.
[57] Ibid., p.301.

revolutionary Russia. Thus, on the one hand, Benjamin valued the positive efforts of the Soviet state to bring technology closer to the proletariat, but on the other, he observed that the role of technology under the Soviet state had not undergone a change and, thus, the destructive powers of technology in the exploitation of nature by man remained intact.

Several Marxist authors, starting from the early Lukács, observed Engels's failure in understanding that technological development was not an autonomous process and, on that basis, criticised the subsequent employment of this theory as 'technicism.' Antonio Gramsci, for example, criticised what was thought of as the objective structure of technology. Thus, he said that the philosophy of praxis does not analyse a machine in order to know which are the chemical or physical elements of that specific technology, but 'only in so far as it is a moment of the material forces of production, is an object of property of particular social forces, and expresses a social relation which in turn corresponds to a particular historical period.'[58] Therefore, Gramsci thought that technological development under capitalism was inherently conditioned by it and, hence, any analysis of technology would express the social relations which were embodied therein. The German Karl Korsch, an acquaintance of Benjamin and one of the most influential sources for his understanding of Marxism, said that:

> The correct materialist conception of history, understood theoretically in a dialectical way and practically in a revolutionary way, is incompatible with separate branches of knowledge that are isolated and autonomous, and with purely theoretical investigations that are scientifically objective in dissociation from revolutionary practice.[59]

Thus, Korsch also disagreed with the conception of natural science as an autonomous entity. For him, the overthrow of existing social relations demanded by Marx also entailed the overturn of all forms of bourgeois social consciousness, among them those embodied in technological rationality.

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[58] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), p.466.
[59] Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans, by Fred Halliday (London and New York: Verso, 2012), p.60.

As I have already mentioned, in 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' Lukács criticised Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*. Years later, Lukács had to defend himself from the attacks of László Rudas and Abram Deborin, who claimed that there was a socially unmediated relationship of humans to nature and that, therefore, natural sciences were objective and autonomous. For Lukács, in the present stage of social development there cannot be an immediate relationship of humans to nature. According to him, 'our knowledge of nature is socially mediated, because its material foundation is socially mediated.'[60] The conception of a dualism between nature and society, defended by Rudas and Deborin, was for Lukács inconceivable from a Marxist perspective. For him, the exchange of matter with nature, whether or not this depends on human activity, is 'simultaneously determined by the economic structure of society.'[61] Finally, Lukács also criticised Rudas because he tried to understand industry as an 'objective process of production.' By doing so, Rudas understood capitalism as a mere appearance which, once unveiled, reveals its concrete shape to be the same as socialism. Lukács attacked Rudas and called him an apologist because in his argument he left 'the specific historical determinations of capitalism' out of the picture.[62]

The critique of technicism and its adoption in the Soviet Union became a subject of debate in the Italian *operaismo* movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Although Raniero Panzieri's work temporally exceeds the field of study of this thesis, I think it is worth comparing his critique of technicism in the pages of the *Quaderni Rossi* with Benjamin's more general view on technology. In the essay 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the "Objectivists",' Panzieri bases his critique of the objective nature of technology defended by technicism on Marx's writings on machinery. Hence, he says that when Marx talks in the thirteenth chapter of volume one of *Capital* about a simple shape of cooperation, he is talking about *the specific mode* of cooperation that is *the fundamental form* adopted by capitalist production. Panzieri argues that Marx had thus already presupposed that a particular form of cooperation under technology embodied the form of capitalist production and, therefore, such technology did not appear objectively. In direct contrast to

[60] Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, trans. by Esther Leslie (London: Verso, 2000), p.106.
[61] Ibid., p.113.
[62] Ibid., p.135.

technicism and to the idea of progress defended by many vulgar Marxists, Panzieri claims that under capitalism 'Technological progress itself … appears as a mode of existence of capital, as *its* development.'[63] He suggests that 'the capitalist use of machinery is *not*, so to speak, a mere distortion of, or deviation from, some "objective" development that is in itself rational, but that capital has *determined* technological development.'[64] Therefore, technology under capitalism develops according to the form given by capital. Panzieri warns that in capitalist usage it is not only machines that are incorporated to capital, but also methods, organisational techniques, etc. He criticises the adoption of capitalist technology and methods by socialist states in the following terms: 'The relationship of revolutionary action to technological "rationality" is to "comprehend" it, but not in order to acknowledge and exalt it, rather in order to subject it to a new use: to the socialist use of machines.'[65] Panzieri thinks that in the bureaucratic planned economy of the Soviet Union, the authoritative element of productive organisation which arises within capitalism still survives, although it is not manifested in the same crude forms as in capitalist society. He claims that this will happen insofar as bureaucracies will appeal to objective rationality and not to the working class. At the end of the essay, Panzieri argues that, for Marx, the transition to a communist society did not only mean the reduction of the working day in order to allow free time for the free social and mental activities of the individual, but the total overthrow of capitalist relations.[66] Production for the sake of production should be abolished and, consequently, planned development, rationality and technology should be subjected to social forces.

Like Benjamin, Panzieri understood that technological progress does not respond to an objective development, but is wholly conditioned by its use and conception under capitalism. Thus, both authors argue that technological development—under the

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[63] Raniero Panzieri, 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the "Objectivists",' trans. by Quintin Hoare, in *Outlines of a Critique of Technology*, p.46. Italics in the original.
[64] Ibid., p.47. Italics in the original.
[65] Ibid., p.57.
[66] Trotsky was among those who praised the adoption of capitalist methods of organisation of labour, because they would provide workers with more free time. In *Problems of Everyday Life*, Trotsky claims that higher productivity cannot be achieved without the mechanisation and automation of the labour force. However, suggests Trotsky, 'The monotony of labor is compensated for by its reduced duration and its increased easiness.' He thought that this state of affairs would remain in force until the arrival of a chemical and power revolution that would sweep aside the existing forms of mechanisation. Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life*, p.302.

present conditions—is nothing but the development of capitalism and, therefore, also of its forms of exploitation. Benjamin, however, goes beyond this perspective and claims that the only possible outcome of capitalist technological development is catastrophe. With regard to Lukács, Benjamin agrees that specific modes of production condition technology and that technology, in turn, conditions not only the modes of production, but the whole spectrum of social relations. He also understood in the same way as Lukács that an unmediated relation of human beings to nature was impossible. Technology and the social relations derived from its use were already 'second nature' to us and had shaped the world accordingly. Any claim to an immediate relation to nature was nothing but a mystification.

### Technology and the Metabolism of the Earth

In her book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Susan Buck-Morss criticises Lenin's conception of technology as the embodiment of objective science and argues that technology is rather 'the material manifestation of human beings' relationships with nature and among themselves.'[67] For her, Benjamin's conception of technology as an interplay between humanity and nature would be more appropriate than Lenin's. Hence, she claims that socialism necessitated a totally new relationship to nature, such as that advocated by Benjamin. Buck-Morss traces Benjamin's idea on the interplay between humanity and nature back to the young Marx, who in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* had written that in order to overcome human alienation a reconciliation between humans and nature was required. Communism, wrote Marx, 'is the *definitive* resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and between man and man.'[68] According to him, the supersession of private property would bring the emancipation of the human senses and nature would lose 'its mere *utility* by the fact that its utilization has become *human* utilization.'[69]

Benjamin scholars such as Esther Leslie and Michael Löwy have recognised in addition a close affinity between Benjamin's idea of the interplay between humanity

[67] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2000), p.118.
[68] Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. and ed. by T. B. Bottomore (London: C. A. Watts & Co., 1963), p.155. Italics in the original.
[69] Ibid., p.160. Italics in the original.

and nature and Marx's conception of the metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) between human beings and the earth. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* Marx had already written that human beings are part of nature: 'To say that man *lives* from nature means that nature is his *body* with which he must remain in a continuous interchange in order not to die.'[70] Therefore, like Benjamin later, Marx thought that humanity and nature formed a single body. The Marxist and environmentalist scholar John Bellamy Foster argues that with the concept of metabolism, Marx gave a solid and scientific expression to this relationship between nature and society, 'depicting the complex, dynamic interchange between human beings and nature resulting from human labor.'[71] Through this concept, Marx was able to describe the relation of humans to nature not only as a reaction to the conditions it imposes, but also as a process that humans affect. In volume one of *Capital*, Marx describes the labour process as the inevitable condition for the metabolic interaction between human beings and nature:

> Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces that belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.[72]

In this fragment, Marx stresses that nature is humanity's own body. Thus, metabolism is the interaction (or interplay) between human beings and nature through labour. In this way, he criticises capitalism because it disturbs the metabolic interaction between humans and nature and because it causes 'an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism.'[73] Capitalist production interrupts the metabolic cycle and, as a consequence, disrupts the fertility of the soil.

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[70] Ibid., p.127. Italics in the original.
[71] John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), p.158.
[72] Marx, *Capital*, vol.1, p.283.
[73] Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 3*, trans. by David Fernbach (London: Penguin and New Left Review, 1981), p.949.

According to Marx, this destruction of the metabolism between humanity and nature compels its restoration in order to regulate social production. In volume three of *Capital*, Marx returned to this point and to the reconciliation of humans and nature under communism that he had prefigured in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Furthermore, this fragment advances many important environmental issues:

> Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.[74]

This text also touches upon many of Benjamin's preoccupations with regard to the interaction between humanity and nature. Although Marx advocates that the associated producers govern this metabolism *rationally*, we may discern an impulse in Marx to uphold a relationship between humanity and nature which is not founded on the mastery of one over the other. Esther Leslie argues that here Marx does not posit the control of nature, but rather that 'it is the interchange between humans and non-human nature that is in need of control.'[75] Indeed, the control of or interplay with this metabolism must be realised collectively.

John Bellamy Foster argues that Marx's focus on Epicurus in his doctoral thesis was crucial to the development of his materialist dialectics and his materialist conception of nature. For this very reason, he laments that Plekhanov instead based his dialectical method on the French mechanistic materialism of the eighteenth century, thus falling into a dangerous positivism. Bellamy Foster suggests that Western Marxism, and more specifically the Frankfurt School, battled fiercely against this positivism, but at too heavy a cost, since they created a gap between nature and society and neglected the coevolution of human beings and nature.[76] He regrets that the Frankfurt School developed an 'ecological' critique which—in contrast to Marx's—lacked any knowledge of ecological science and, thus, attributed the alienation of human beings from nature merely to the adoption of science and the

[74] Ibid., p.959.
[75] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto, 2000), p.8.
[76] John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, p.244.

centrality of reason in the Enlightenment. According to Bellamy Foster, such an analysis was rooted in romanticism and lacked an analysis of the real, material alienation of nature, such as that provided by Marx's theory of the metabolic rift. Certainly, Benjamin had no knowledge of ecology and natural sciences. Indeed, as Löwy has noted, Benjamin's conception of nature and technology has its roots in the romantic tradition—a tradition that reappears in such different authors as Rousseau, Novalis and the surrealists. However, according to Löwy, Benjamin's critique of modern (capitalist) civilisation is not a nostalgic return to the past and to pre-modern and pre-capitalist values, but rather 'a *detour* through the past on the way to a utopian future.'[77] For Löwy, although Marx was far from being romantic, his theory of the metabolism between earth and humanity was similar to Benjamin's ideas about the communion between nature and humanity.[78] Bellamy Foster's critique of the Frankfurt School is nonetheless appropriate in Benjamin's case. His ideas on the interplay between humanity and nature are not founded on a scientific approach, but rather on a romantic, *quasi* mystical conception. However, Benjamin's particular contribution lies in having stressed the importance of conceiving humanity as part of nature and the danger that the maxim of the mastery of nature by man entails, precisely because such a conception was ultimately self-damaging for humankind. In this regard, Buck-Morss claims that it is not surprising that Soviet socialism used the potential of technology to counteract the brutal effects of nature on the human *physis* and to prompt the dream of the domination of nature. However, she says that 'as humans are themselves natural bodies, the dream is self-damaging and ultimately self-defeating.'[79]

I do not want to claim here that Benjamin's approach to this ecological problem was as rigorous as was Marx's. Rather, by bringing him into dialogue with Marx, I want to fill a gap that exists in his romantic conception of nature in order to make his argument more useful for a materialist approach. Nevertheless, I think that

[77] Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p.5.
[78] Benjamin perceived an exemplary apotheosis of this union at the end of the novel *Lesabéndio*. After the construction of the Tower and the fusion of the head-system and the torso-system in Pallas, Lesabéndio decides that he wants to form a single being with the asteroid. Finally, he manages to unite himself with the head-system and the torso-system of Pallas and become one with them. When Lesabéndio stretches out his entire body, he realises that his physis is the entire torso-system of Pallas and he has the strength of a star.
[79] Buck-Morss, p.118.

Benjamin's conception of technology and nature can be used as a corrective not only to the Marxist positivist accounts of technology, but also those environmentalists who are too focused on the predetermination of nature. In fact, Benjamin did not reduce nature 'to that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call "Nature."'[80] Thus, he did not conceive nature as 'first nature,' but rather as 'second nature.' Therefore, the revolutionary move of Benjamin in this regard is to think of technology as something which may be incorporated into the body of the earth and humankind. Hence, technology should not be used to disturb the metabolism between man and the earth, but to improve it.

Bellamy Foster claims that the tragic relation of the Soviet Union with the environment was due primarily to Stalin's politics, based on production for production's sake. According to him, Stalin discarded the valuable contributions of early Soviet ecology and the conservationism promoted personally by Lenin in the 1920s. [81] Thus, the Soviet state ended up replicating the same patterns of development that had characterised capitalism, occasionally in a more distorted fashion.[82] However, I would like to argue that, as I have shown in this chapter, there were some problems in the conception of technology and nature in the Soviet Union that originated before the rise of Stalin. During his brief stay in Moscow, Benjamin had already spotted some symptoms of such a misconception. Thus, he probably feared that in the Soviet Union the use of technology would take a similar path of self-destruction to that of the capitalist states.

Presumably, Benjamin expected to find in the Soviet Union an innervation of 'second technology' into the proletariat. 'Second technology' permitted a balanced relationship between human beings, nature and technology, whereby the risk of human exploitation was reduced to a minimum. Benjamin characterised 'second technology' as a technology that has distanced itself from the dynamic forces of nature and is, therefore, divorced from the capricious, religious fate associated with 'first technology,' which escapes reason and whose effects cannot be controlled by human beings. Certainly, Benjamin perceived an attempt to innervate technology

[80] 'One-Way Street,' SW1, p.487.
[81] Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, p.243.
[82] Bellamy Foster, 'Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology,' in *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 105, no. 2 (September 1999), p.400.

into all the layers of the population across the vast regions of the Soviet Union. It is likely that Benjamin thought that with film—especially with the educational films which travelled in trains around the country—proletarians and peasants had the chance to adapt to technology in a more playful way than through their direct intercourse with machinery. In fact, in the conclusion of his text on Russian film, Benjamin seemed to accept that Soviet films had completed this process of technological innervation—although Benjamin regretted the absence of an ironical and therapeutic view of technology such as that embodied by Chaplin. Nonetheless, Benjamin thought that as soon as 'second technology' 'had secured its initial revolutionized gains,' the problems concerning the individual (e.g. questions of love and death) would have to come to the fore again.[83] Benjamin was worried that Russians seemed to have forgotten important life concerns in favour of the technologisation of everyday life. Soviet citizens were too busy modernising the country and becoming allies of machines to care about such 'bourgeois' concerns. In this way, dramatic and tragic treatments of love were excluded from Russian life and, accordingly, from Soviet film. Benjamin was also concerned because films in Russia could not perform a critique of Soviet man. He thought that Soviet films should return the gaze to those primarily individual issues and thereby provide that critique, something which a good comedy would probably perform better than any other genre. This task, Benjamin highlights, should be carried out by the people, and not only by the state. For this reason, Benjamin claims that Bolshevik society would only be stable when it was able to create a new 'social comedy.'[84]

Benjamin's historicisation of 'first' and 'second technology' is, nonetheless, precarious. He matches the technology of the machine age with 'second technology' and gives as an example an aircraft that needs no human crew. Technologies of reproduction, for example, are part of 'second technology,' because they detach objects from the value of tradition. However, Benjamin warns that art is linked to both 'first' and 'second technology' and, although reproducible technology points towards the dissolution of the first, old practices and views on art tend to revive 'first technology' in the second. Thus, as 'second technologies' that detach themselves from ritual and the enslavement to irrational forces, Benjamin thought that

[83] 'Work of Art,' SW3, n124.
[84] 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film,' SW2, p.15.

technologies of reproduction had inherent, specifically technical features which opened up a revolutionary potential. This argument led Benjamin to more deterministic accounts of technology in which he seems to imply that the adoption of some uses of technology becomes inevitable over time. This trend was possibly begun in the article 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz.' From this article to the different versions of the 'Work of Art' essay through the more technologically-determinist 'The Author as Producer,' Benjamin is especially concerned with the specific uses of the medium which may or may not develop the *natural* possibilities opened up by a specific technology.

**'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz'**

The article 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz' is especially relevant for our discussion because it begins to address some questions about the relationship between the technological nature of the medium and the content of the representation. This text is therefore important to understanding the debates on aesthetics and politics which took place in Germany and the Soviet Union at the time, but also to tracing Benjamin's argument about technology and its relation to art production. In this article, Benjamin fiercely attacks the article Schmitz wrote on *Battleship Potemkin*, which branded the film as tendentious.[85] For Benjamin, Schmitz's article is a clear case of bourgeois critique, which tends to search for 'beauty' even when the artwork 'speaks of the annihilation of his own class.'[86] Schmitz analyses the film according to the criterion that he would apply to a bourgeois novel of society. In this way, Benjamin argues that Schmitz does not understand the principle of the film medium. According to Benjamin, film is the first medium which makes the depiction of class movements in collective spaces possible, endowing the masses with an architectonic quality. In Benjamin's words, 'No other could reproduce this collective in motion. No other could convey such beauty or the currents of horror and panic it contains.'[87] Benjamin argues that the scene of the slaughter in the port of Odessa in *Battleship Potemkin* influenced subsequent films such as Vsevolod Pudovkin's film *Mother*,

[85] Oscar A. H. Schmitz, 'Potemkinfilm und Tendenzkunst,' *Die literarische Welt*, no. 10, year 3, 11th March 1927 (Special issue: *Das neue Russland*), p.7.
[86] 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' SW2, p.18.
[87] Ibid.

especially the scene of the massacre of the factory workers.[88] Hence, Benjamin argues that Soviet film has discovered that the depiction of collectives, especially in their emancipating battle, is a perfect theme for film representation. He also claims that the prismatic work made by film with regard to the physical environment, that is, the explosion and articulation of 'second nature' through the 'optical unconscious,' is now used with regard to the human collective. In this way, the collective can better understand its own nature, by disclosing and articulating itself and its relation to the material world. This argument is similar to the one made in the 'Work of Art' essay, in which Benjamin argues that film can fulfil the original and justified interest of the masses 'in understanding themselves and therefore their class.'[89]

In his review of *Potemkin*, Schmitz criticises Eisenstein's attempt to place collectiveness above individuality and cites some novels which are able, according to him, to criticise bourgeois society through the spirit of an individual. These novels are John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, Lewis Sinclair's *Babbit* and Jakob Wasserman's *Laudin and his family*. For Schmitz, a collective cannot act freely; only an individual is able to. Schmitz thus equates humanity with the individual and refuses to accept that collectives can have any agency. For that reason, he considers the film to fail in its artistic pretensions, because only individual human beings can act freely and, therefore, only in this way can viewers or readers sympathise with them. Schmitz specifically attacks the social types depicted in the film, such as the captain, the petty officers and the doctor. For him, the film should portray the individuals critically and not focus only on types. For example, he finds the representation of the captain as a sadistic oppressor, instead of developing his individual features, reductive. Benjamin responds angrily to this argument, accusing it of abstruse determinism. For him, technological reproducibility created the possibility of bringing works of art to large audiences and thereby substituting individual, elitist observation with a collective view. *Potemkin* is a perfect example of how collective characters are particularly suited to cinematographic representation. However, Schmitz attempts to analyse the film as if it were a novel and, therefore,

[88] Ibid. Benjamin saw *Mother*, *Potemkin* and part of *The Trial of the Three Million* at a screening organised exclusively for him, with an interpreter who translated the intertitles for him and with no musical accompaniment. *Mother* was enjoying great success in Germany at the time of the article's publication. The screenwriter and editor of the journal Willy Haas wrote a review of the film published in the same issue of *Die literarische Welt*, p.7.
[89] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.115.

does not pay attention to the particularities of film as a medium. In doing so, Schmitz reduces his scope to the psychology of the individual. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács shows that the structure of the novel, based on an individual protagonist who seeks meaning in his life, was historically and class conditioned. There Lukács had already made a connection between genre and history, invoking the historicity of aesthetic forms. In this way Benjamin criticises Schmitz's attempt to impose the features of the novel onto the film form, which finds a more valid expression in those Soviet films which depict collective characters. Despite this he in no way suggests that the representation of individuals should be avoided; had he done so the argument in the accompanying article on Soviet film calling for the appearance of films capable of providing a critique of Soviet man could not be understood (nor, by the same token, could his appraisal of Chaplin).

All the points mentioned above lead Schmitz to criticise the film as *Tendenzkunst*, i.e. as tendentious art. The notion of *Tendenzkunst* came to the fore in the debates held at that time, particularly in the negative responses to the film. Many reviews valued the film as a good work of art in artistic and technical terms, but saw it as marred by its political tendency. In an essay from 1932 entitled 'Tendency or Partisanship,' Georg Lukács analysed the term 'tendency' (*Tendenz*). For Lukács, tendency is highly relative; it is used in bourgeois literary theory to scorn artworks in which 'its class basis and aim are hostile (in class terms) to the prevailing orientation.'[90] In other words, one's own tendency 'is not a tendency at all, but only that of one's opponent.'[91] Lukács understands that the word 'tendency' has been taken up by proletarian literature as 'a badge of honour,' but warns that it is theoretically incorrect. For him, this concept takes on the bourgeois formulation of the problem and the bourgeois terminology, embracing also the bourgeois-eclectic contradictions involved in the very terms of the problem itself. Lukács argues that the term 'tendency' cannot be extricated from its origins in a bourgeois antithesis of 'pure art' and 'tendency.' In this antithesis, any depiction of society was described as 'tendentious' and was disdained as 'inartistic' and 'hostile-to-art.' In his defence of realism, Lukács claims that a depiction of objective reality must be carried out from within, by the proletariat, who, by not introducing any demands from without, did

[90] Lukács, '"Tendency" or Partisanship?,' in *Essays on Realism*, ed. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), p.35.
[91] Ibid.

not have to face this ideological barrier. For him, then, 'a correct dialectical depiction and literary portrayal of reality presupposes the partisanship of the writer' for the proletarian class.[92] Thus, Lukács opts for the term 'partisanship' (*Parteilichkeit*) instead of 'tendency.'

In 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' Benjamin understands 'tendency' differently and challenges the concept by inserting technology into the pairing of aesthetics and politics. For Benjamin, technical revolutions such as the invention of cinema are fracture points in art history and make visible the political tendency which is implicit in every work of art, that is, the relation of art to the conditions of production and the living context in which it emerges. As noted in the first chapter, the word that Benjamin uses in German is *Technik*, which means both technique and technology. Furthermore, in contrast to the word *Technologie*, *Technik* also alludes to social relations. According to Benjamin, with the appearance of new media the political tendency is transformed and comes to the surface through the fractures of the new medium, passing 'from a concealed element of art into a manifest one.'[93] Social relations inherent to the very technology of the medium, such as the collective quality of both production and reception in cinema, are thus revealed. In 'The Author as Producer' (1934), Benjamin brings this conception of tendency to the debate and tries to overcome the opposition between 'quality' and 'tendency.' The understanding of 'tendency' in this text is not far from the one analysed by Lukács, but the role of technology/technique in terms of the relation of the author to the means of production gives the term a new, revolutionary nuance. Benjamin does not dismiss tendency, but criticises many writers of the left who think that tendency is the only thing that matters. For that reason, Benjamin declares: 'a work that exhibits the correct tendency must of necessity have every other quality.'[94] This statement opposes a position defended by some Soviet writers, also becoming popular among French communists, which Benjamin had analysed in the aforementioned article 'The Political Grouping of Russian Writers.' The All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers had debated the question of whether literary value should be determined by its revolutionary form or its revolutionary content, resolving eventually that, in the absence of a specific revolutionary form, revolutionary content

[92] Ibid., p.43.
[93] Ibid., p.17.
[94] 'The Author as Producer,' SW2, p.769.

was what mattered.[95] Maria Gough argues that, by calling for an artwork which presents both a correct political tendency and quality, Benjamin is asserting 'the inextricability of the terms of the antithesis itself.'[96] Furthermore, he is not only arguing that there is an interrelation between tendency and quality, but he is also introducing the precedence of technology over the two. In Benjamin's film aesthetics, content and form should conform to the technological—and hence political—structure of film. For this reason, Benjamin argues that film demands certain specific uses. The political tendency, in fact, emerges from the relation that the film presupposes to its position as *Technik*.

## Refunctioning the Medium

In 'The Author as Producer,' Benjamin also addresses the position of the artist and of the work of art within the relations of production. In this way, what concerns Benjamin is not so much the attitude of the work of art to the relations of production, as its position within the literary relations of production of its time, what he calls the 'literary *technique* of works.' Benjamin says that technique is 'the concept that makes literary products accessible to an immediately social, and therefore materialist, analysis.'[97] He wants to highlight, as Esther Leslie puts it, that 'specific artworks are seen to exist not in a vacuum but within a socio-historical formation, "in living social connections."'[98] Technology continuously transforms these connections. In film, technique/technology (*Technik*) had revolutionised the relation of the masses to art. Therefore, *Technik* had to be taken into account in any claim regarding the politics of art. Benjamin argued that the concept of technique 'provides the dialectical starting point from which the unfruitful antithesis of form and content can be surpassed,' and furthermore, in a more deterministic fashion, that it 'contains an indication of the correct determination of the relation between tendency and quality.'[99] Here Benjamin seems to imply that technology itself tends to specific uses. This, to some extent, deterministic argument was already present in his defence of *Potemkin*. There,

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[95] 'The Political Grouping of Russian Writers,' SW2, p.7.
[96] Maria Gough, 'Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde,' in *October*, vol. 101 (Summer, 2002), p.63.
[97] Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer,' SW2, p.770.
[98] Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, p.99.
[99] Ibid.

when he poses the problem of the plot, he suggests that 'the vital, fundamental advances in art are a matter neither of new content nor of new forms—the technological revolution takes precedence over both.'[100] For Benjamin, most films do not solve this problem, precisely because they still cling to the old media and to their historically- and technologically-conditioned representation. Thus, they do not understand the potential opened up by the technological nature of film. However, *Potemkin*, which Benjamin assesses as 'a great film, a rare achievement,' does. Those who criticise *Potemkin* for being tendentious fail to understand the ideological and technical foundations of the film. As Benjamin recognises, 'there is plenty of bad tendentious art, including bad socialist tendentious art.'[101] However, *Potemkin* succeeds both in showing a correct political tendency and artistic quality. By this, Benjamin means that the political tendency or partisanship emerges precisely through the technical nature of the medium, especially in its treatment of collective movements and the depiction of collective spaces. The artistic quality also emerges through the exploitation of the potential offered by the medium itself, without being too dependent on older media or genre conventions.

Thus, in this text, Benjamin rails against the understanding of new media according to conventions associated with older ones. In this case, Schmitz sought in the film medium the same characteristics that he expected from a novel, i.e. the individual development of the hero. However, Benjamin, who understood the arrival of film historically, detected some specific possibilities which were opened up by the very technological nature of the medium. One of those artistic fractures—i.e. new potentials of the medium—that Benjamin discovered in film was the 'optical unconscious,' a concept that he used to describe the new relationship between subject and object through the mediation of the camera. The transformation of the relation between the body of the collective, in the form of a cinema audience, and the space of their surroundings was, according to Benjamin, revolutionised—and this was brought about by the *Technik* of film. For this reason, in 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz' Benjamin defines film as one of the most dramatic fractures in artistic formations: 'with film a *new realm of consciousness* comes into being.'[102] This was Benjamin's first reference to the 'optical unconscious.' According to Benjamin,

[100] 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' SW2, p.17.
[101] Ibid., p.19.
[102] Ibid. Italics in the original.

thanks to its 'prismatic' work, film penetrates the tissue of reality to, eventually, explode 'second nature.' The fragments of 'second nature' can be arranged in new ways and articulate in such a manner the physical world, both human beings and space, so that this new nature can finally be understood by the collective.

In the Soviet Union, Dziga Vertov developed a similar theory about the analytical and revealing capacity that the optics of the film apparatus opened up. In this way, Vertov opposed the '"life as it is," seen by the aided eye of the movie camera (kino-eye), to "life as it is," seen by the imperfect human eye.'[103] According to him, the cinematographic camera is able to decipher a world which remains unknown to the human being. Vertov endows the camera with the potential of revealing and showing what the eye cannot see, to the point of giving it a voice: 'I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it.' [104] For Vertov, the cinematographic apparatus is superior because it is freed from human immobility and because it leads to the creation of a fresh perception, no longer tied to tradition or to the psychological burden of human beings.

The 'optical unconscious' was an example of the transformations that technology produced in art formations and prevailed over content and form. The relationship between the audience and the world changes, due precisely to the technical nature of the medium, rather than the use of an avant-gardist form or revolutionary content. Nonetheless, Benjamin differentiates between a progressive and a regressive development of literary technique. For Benjamin, a progressive development of literary technique aims to liberate the means of production, in order to enable new relations of production and consumption. In the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin speaks of 'the natural use of productive forces.'[105] By productive forces, Benjamin means the labour force, that is, both the proletariat and technology. For him, there is an affinity between the proletariat and technology. The latter should serve proletarians to change the relations of production. However, as I have argued, the capitalist conception of technology presses *Technik* towards a reversal of this conception and prevents technology from being put to humane ends. In this context, the natural development of technology does not come about automatically. Authors

[103] Vertov, 'The Man with a Movie Camera,' Op. Cit., pp.84, 85.
[104] Vertov, 'The Council of Three,' Ibid., p.17.
[105] 'Work of Art,' p.121.

are asked, first of all, to consider themselves as producers. According to Benjamin, an author who aspires to do revolutionary art cannot feel solidarity with the proletariat only in his/her attitudes. Hence the author must consider him-/herself a producer. Once the author has become a producer he/she should recognise that 'technical forces push towards restructuring relations of production.'[106] Through artistic practices, the author-producer should conduct that drive in order to compensate for, and ultimately overcome, the deficiencies in the social organisation of technology.

In 'The Author as Producer,' Benjamin was especially concerned with the role of the intellectual in the class struggle. Through this lecture, he wanted to make intellectuals reflect on what their position was with regard to the fight against fascism. In fact, Benjamin addressed the lecture, on the one hand, to many German intellectuals whom he blamed for the defeat of the intelligentsia in Germany and the rise of the Nazis to power and, on the other hand, to the French communists who were repeating the same mistakes that Benjamin had detected in Soviet Russia. Benjamin wanted to make his readers aware that they did not have effective control over their means of production. In other words, they were proletarianised. This was true in his own case. In a letter to Gershom Scholem from around that time, Benjamin described *his* communism as the expression of his own experiences. Thus, he defined his situation as that of 'a man who is completely or almost completely deprived of any means of production to proclaim his right to them, both in this thinking and in his life.'[107] The same holds true for Bertolt Brecht. The rise of fascism in Germany had dismantled his system of production, as he told Benjamin in a conversation in 1938: 'They have proletarianized me, too. Not only have they robbed me of my house, my fishpond, and my car, but they've also stolen my stage and my audience.'[108] Maria Gough argues that in 'The Author as Producer' Benjamin was calling for a transformation in the arts which overturned the pivotal dichotomies of bourgeois aesthetic experience, based on the division of labour, 'namely, producer and consumer, performer and spectator, writer and reader,

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[106] Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism* p.93.

[107] Letter to Gerhard Scholem, 6 May 1934. Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin (1910-1940)*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.439.

[108] 'Diary Entries, 1938,' SW3, pp.337, 338.

individual and collective.'[109] These transformations would accomplish the progressive development of literary technique. Therefore, the author-producers should revolutionise, on the one hand, their own division of intellectual labour and, on the other, the role of the consumers—who should also become producers. In this way, Benjamin urges to rethink the conception of genres and forms according to Brecht's functional transformation or refunctioning (*Umfunktionierung*). Benjamin thus champions a transformation of the form (he gives the example of the concert), which must fulfil two conditions: the elimination of the antithesis between performers and listeners and that between technique and content.[110] Benjamin finds an example of this transformation in the Soviet press, as he writes not only in 'The Author as Producer,' but also in the 'Work of Art' essay.[111] Readers can be increasingly turned into writers, as had happened since the end of the nineteenth century all over Europe. However, in Western Europe, in opposition to the Soviet Union, newspapers belonged to capital and were controlled by it. Writers in these countries have not rethought their relation to the means of production as in Russia, where the antithesis between writer and reader has been blurred as a result of a development in consciousness.

Benjamin illustrates the figure of the author-producer with the case of the Soviet writer Sergei Tretiakov, an artist who has been able to commit his work to the social struggle. For Benjamin, his 'operating writing' is the most tangible example of the interdependence between the correct political tendency—here the term 'partisanship' could be used—and a progressive literary tendency. Tretiakov stayed several times in the 'Communist Lighthouse' collective farm or kolkhoz between 1928 and 1930, and instead of just informing his readers of what happened there, he intervened actively in the everyday activities of the farm. Benjamin stresses how the book that Tretiakov wrote after his three stays in the kolkhoz had a great influence on the further development of collective agriculture.[112] Tretiakov belonged to the circle around the journals of the Left Front of the Arts, *Lef* and *Novy Lef*. Among other productivists, Tretiakov defended the use of factography or 'literature of fact' (*literatura fakta*). For them, documentary prose in the form of newspapers, diaries,

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[109] Gough, Op. Cit., pp.70, 71.
[110] 'The Author as Producer,' SW2, pp.775, 776.
[111] Ibid., pp.771, 772; 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.114.
[112] 'The Author as Producer,' pp.770, 771.

travelogues or memoirs worked better for their utilitarian contribution to Soviet life and the awakening of revolutionary commitment than traditional literary media such as the novel. Tretiakov exceeded his role as a reporter and became an operative writer who participated directly in the life of the kolkhoz, using photography in his operative work.[113] He did not use the photographic apparatus simply as a recording device, but rather as a constructive tool with which he could turn peasants into kolkhoziv or collective farmers and contribute to the fulfilment of the First Five-Year Plan.[114]

Some film practices in the Soviet Union also invalidated, partially if not completely, the old antithesis which had governed art for centuries. Benjamin praised the use of amateur or non-professional actors as the transformation of viewers or simple citizens into performers or actors. The point made by Benjamin about people who portray themselves in Vertov's film is part of this transformation. For him, these practices could be considered to be operativist techniques with which to overcome bourgeois antitheses such as producer and consumer, actor and spectator or individual and collective. Feature films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (or by the same token *Strike*, *October* and *The General Line*) also depicted collective characters instead of individuals, confronting the conventions of bourgeois art.[115] In short, Benjamin thought that technology provided a new way of reformulating the division of labour in art. Through these operativist transformations—by which Benjamin is 'exhorting critics to become photomontagists, authors to become critics, critics to become authors, practitioners to become theorists and theorists practitioners'[116]—technology could finally be liberated from subservience to the goals of 'first technology,' that is, the mastery of nature. For this reason, Benjamin places so strong an emphasis on the procedures of 'second technology,' especially on experimentation. Thus, Esther Leslie argues that this 'experimentation plays a role in emancipating the means of production by acting as a training-ground in new modes of interaction between technologies and humans.'[117] The goal of this operativist transformation is precisely to emancipate media such as film, photography, books,

[113] Gough, Op. Cit., pp.772, 773.
[114] Maria Gough, 'Radical Tourism: Sergei Tret'iakov at the Communist Lighthouse,' in *October* no.118 (Autumn, 2006), p.174.
[115] *Strike* (Stachka, 1925), *October* (Oktyabr, 1928).
[116] Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, p.94.
[117] Ibid., p.100.

concerts, etc., from their constrictive dependence on bourgeois practices, which prevent technology from reorganising social relations. Therefore, the politicisation of art that Benjamin demands both in 'The Author as Producer' and in the 'Work of Art' essay is precisely this operative transformation of technique to adapt the course of technology to human ends.

### Groupings of Soviet Arts

In the texts analysed in this chapter, Benjamin particularly defended artists who were part of the Left Front of the Arts, such as Tretiakov or Eisenstein. Thus, it could be argued that Benjamin was taking a position within the different cultural groups. This position, however, was unclear. For example, he accused Russian literature of destroying language. For Benjamin, the development of the communicative aspect of language, turning everything into fact at the expense of expression, was a destructive trend in Russian literature. He contrasts this conception of language with his own, as presented in his early text 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.'[118] It could be argued that this critique was addressed to the literature of fact defended by both productivists and futurists, even though Benjamin shared certain perspectives with this literature, such as the conception of the artist as a craftsman. Likewise, the criticism of Vertov's *One-Sixth of the World* suggests a position of cautious alignment with this group.

Dizga Vertov was, like Tretiakov and Eisenstein, a member of the *Lef*. In fact, he could be said to accomplish perfectly the function that Benjamin demanded of intellectuals in 'The Author as Producer,' that is, to transcend specialisation in the process of intellectual production and transform himself 'from a supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of the proletarian revolution.'[119] Vertov was also aware of the position of filmmakers in the political struggle and their relation to their operative technologies of reproduction. *Man with a Movie Camera* has been widely compared to the theses developed in the 'Work of Art' essay—although Benjamin never mentioned this film. Miriam Hansen, for example, said that this film 'provides a

[118]'Moscow Diary,' p.47.
[119] 'The Author as Producer,' p.780.

cinematic intertext for the artwork essay.'[120] Similarly, John Berger chose *Man with a Movie Camera* to illustrate Benjamin's ideas on technological reproduction in the first episode of his BBC series *Ways of Seeing* (1972). In this programme, Berger discusses Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay with regard to the changes that the technologies of reproduction have caused in art. It is no accident that he quotes, alongside Benjamin's theses, Vertov's manifesto about the Kino-Eye to introduce the new ways of seeing the world that the film apparatus has brought about.

As an artist of the constructivist generation, Vertov used film as a weapon for social transformation, 'as a means for producing a transformation of consciousness and a certainty of accession to a "world of naked truth,"' which according to Annette Michelson was achieved paradoxically 'in the acceptance and affirmation of the radically synthetic film technique of montage.'[121] *Man with a Movie Camera* brings the issue of technology—especially the cinematographic apparatus—to the fore and makes it the main topic of representation, drawing form and content from the intervention of the camera and the editing table in reality. The form of the film, in this way, reveals the new rhythms of city life and of mass production, rehearsing the masses in such rhythms in a playful way. This film solves the problem that Benjamin saw in plots, because it draws content from the form that this new technological medium opens up. The film also solves the problem that Benjamin perceived in *One-Sixth of the World* with regard to the depiction of the relation between people and means of production. Thus, in *Man with a Movie Camera*, the relations of production are shown in a more evident way and film technology is, furthermore, at the centre of the film, recording reality and training spectators in the new mode of apperception that this technology brings about. The cinematographer—Vertov's brother, Mikhail Kaufman—appears as another (operative) producer, linked to his technology of production. Therefore, the filmmaker shows his position in the system of production and aligns himself with the other producers in the changes that the Soviet Union is undergoing. Vertov shows several times the *taktisch* character of film and the huge 'room for play' (*Spielraum*) with which to experiment with the film form. For example, in a sequence of the film, time stops; then, several frames are shown at standstill. Subsequently, Vertov's wife and collaborator, Yelizaveta Svilova, appears

120 Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p.87.
121 Annette Michelson, 'Introduction' to Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, p.xxv.

on screen manipulating and cutting the filmstrip. Once the images are edited, the filmstrip is put in the editing projector and the images acquire movement again. The sequence shows the process of production of the film and the relation of the film workers to their material and to their means of production.[122]

In one of the most relevant fragments of the film, Vertov shows the relation of the hand to the machine in different modes of production, showing the speeding-up process from a basic form of manual labour to a more mechanised variety on the assembly line. Given the technophilia manifested by Vertov both in the texts he wrote and in his films, it cannot be denied that these images affirm Taylorist principles. In his nearly Futurist manifesto 'WE' (the 1922 version) Vertov proclaimed:

> Our path leads through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man./ In revealing the machine's soul, in causing the worker to love his workbench, the peasant his tractor, the engineer his engine—/ We introduce creative joy into all mechanical labor,/ We bring people into closer kinship with machines,/ We foster new people./ *The new man*, free of unwieldiness and clumsiness, will have the light, precise movements of machines, and he will be the gratifying subject of our films.[123]

In *Man with a Movie Camera* the new Soviet man that Vertov is seeking to represent passes necessarily through his own technologisation. He must feel empathy with the machine (as Vertov does with the camera) and familiarise himself with the use of technology. One could argue that Vertov is fetishising technology, but it could also be argued that he is doing something similar to what Tretiakov expresses in his 'Biography of the Object.' There, Tretiakov defends a novel which tells the story of an object, in order to show the relations of production through the creation of such an object by human beings, in opposition to the psychological novel developed by The All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers, which always shows man in his leisure time. In *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov shows the material relation between

[122] Showing the labour processes to the masses in an educative way was a primary task for Vertov. For example, in *Kinoglaz* (1924), Vertov shows in reverse motion the history of bread, going back to the fields where the rye has been grown. In this way, the spectator understands the labour process and the relations of production which a product such as bread entails.
[123] Vertov, 'We: Variant of a Manifesto,' Op. Cit., p.8. Italics in the original.

human beings in their labour process and the commodities which are produced as a result of their labour. Therefore, Vertov is following Benjamin's maxim that cinema is a perfect means for materialist exposition.[124] At the same time, however, Vertov is using cinema to bring technology closer to Soviet audiences and to imbricate it into their bodies. He is asking the new Soviet man to incorporate the rationalisation of machines into his own body. Of course, Benjamin did not ask human beings to adapt that part of technology, i.e. the rational, faultless side. However, Vertov's operativist understanding of the film apparatus served similar purposes to those advocated by Benjamin, that is, to rehearse the adaptation of workers not only to the technology they have to deal with in their work places, but also to the new modes of perception that cinema opens up.

In the third, 1939 version of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin adds Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* (Tri pesni o Lenine, 1934), along with Joris Ivens' *Misère au Borinage* (1933), as examples to illustrate how everyone has the chance to become a movie extra.[125] As Benjamin hoped this essay would be published in the journal *Das Wort* in Moscow, Miriam Hansen argues that it may be understood as an act of solidarity with Vertov, who had been accused of formalism following *Man with a Movie Camera*.[126] Vertov was gradually becoming isolated from the Soviet film industry and his plans and projects were little by little being rejected. He felt that the increasing bureaucratisation of the film industry under Stalin's regime was subjecting filmmakers to the same roles and functions which the revolutionary project had set out to abolish.[127] In a similar vein to Hansen, Maria Gough suggests that the introduction of Tretiakov in 'The Author as Producer' is also a gesture of solidarity with another artist who had been moved away from the front line of Soviet artistic life because of his opposition to official socialist realism. By 1934, the year in which Benjamin wrote 'The Author as Producer,' his operativist aesthetics had been rendered obsolete by both the 1932 party's abolition of all individual cultural organisations and the 'official endorsement … of an exclusive aesthetic policy of

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[124] 'Work of Art,' SW3, n113.
[125] 'Work of Art' (third version), *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, Vol. 4 (1938-1940)*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.262.
[126] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p.87.
[127] Michelson, p.lx.

socialist realism.' [128] Stalin had condemned the avant-garde and especially productivism by 1932. In 1937, during the Great Purge, he arrested and executed Tretiakov. Benjamin knew of his death months later, on 1st July 1938, through Brecht's lover, the actress and writer Margarete Steffin.[129] One could argue, along with Hal Foster, that Benjamin's claim—made in 1934— therefore came too late.[130] However, the choice of Tretiakov as an example of political commitment and artistic quality might have been a gesture with which to attack the position of the socialist realist platform espoused not in the Soviet Union but by the Institut pour l'étude du fascism in Paris. Hence, this would not be a belated gesture, but a gesture which, Miriam Gough argues, came 'late, in time.' According to her, Benjamin's claim was addressed to this group based in France and not to Soviet intellectuals, in order to correct what Benjamin understood as an erroneous position in the debates about art and politics.[131]

The political climate in Moscow was becoming more and more repressive. The debates on aesthetics and politics held by the German émigrés were leading to the formation of strategic groupings and camarillas. The writings of what Brecht coined the 'Moscow Clique' (Johannes R. Becher, Andor Gábor, Alfred Kurella and Lukács) were becoming highly attached to the orthodox party line promoted by Stalin.[132] In 1938, Benjamin wrote in his diary how disturbing Kurella and Lukács's attacks were for Brecht. Although Brecht supported Stalin until a relatively late stage, at that time he was aware that in the Soviet Union there was a dictatorship *over* the proletariat.[133]

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[128] Gough, 'Paris, Capital of the Avant-Garde,' p.76.
[129] 'Diary Entries, 1938,' p.337.
[130] Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), n275.
[131] Gough, 'Paris, Capital of the Avant-Garde,' p.83.
[132] Part of these discussions can be found in the book *Aesthetics and Politics*. Ernst Bloch was a target of the attacks against expressionism—and modernism in general—started by Lukács' essay 'The Greatness and the Decline of Expressionism' (1934) in *Internationale Literatur* and followed, more aggressively, by an article written by Kurella in *Das Wort*. In the pages of this book the confrontation between Bloch and Lukács can be found in the former's article 'Discussing Expressionism' (1938) and the latter's 'Realism in the Balance' (1938), both published in *Das Wort*. Some short texts that Brecht wrote as counter-attacks against Lukács' offensive are also published in *Aesthetics and Politics*, although they were never published in *Das Wort*—a journal for German intellectuals in exile published in Moscow, of which Brecht was co-editor, albeit with no real control of its policy.
[133] SW3, p.340. Erdmut Wizisla found in a letter from Soma Morgenstern to Gershom Scholem a description of one of the first encounters between Brecht and Benjamin at a dinner with other Berlin intellectuals in around 1927. Morgenstern claims that they had a

The country had been thrown back to a stage of historical development which was supposed to have been superseded: the monarchy. In Russia, said Brecht, 'personal authority reigns supreme.'[134] Nonetheless, Brecht claimed that, insofar as this dictatorship was reporting practical benefits to the proletariat, they should keep supporting it.[135] Benjamin's position was very similar. In a letter to Horkheimer from 3rd August 1939, he argued that he and Brecht still saw in the Soviet Union ('for the moment and with the gravest reservations') 'the agent of our interests in a future war or in the postponement of such a war,' since it was a power whose foreign policy was not dictated by imperialistic interests.[136] Benjamin disapproved of André Gide's book *Return from the USSR* (1936), before reading it, because he found it irresponsible to air his political position (critical of the state of affairs in the Soviet Union) unrestrictedly in public.[137] Benjamin was aware that this support carried a very heavy cost, for 'it demands sacrifices from us as payment, which erode especially those interests closest to us as producers.'[138] For example, he had to endure—without public complaint—the attacks of Alfred Kurella in the pages of the German émigré journal published in Moscow *Internationale Literatur*. An old acquaintance of his, Kurella accused his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* of being an attempt 'to interpret Goethe's basic attitude as Romantic and to declare that the "power of archaic instances," a metaphysical fear in Goethe's life, was the actual

vehement discussion about Stalin and Trotsky. Brecht was entirely on Stalin's side, whereas Benjamin defended Trotsky—although, according to Morgenstern, he did not look very interested in the whole business. Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Christine Shuttleworth (London: Libris, 2009), p.28. Brecht's position of unconditional support changed with time and, despite his reserved defence, he ended up criticising him. Benjamin was not surprised when Gretel Adorno wrote to him that she had heard rumours about Brecht refusing to sign an appeal for the glorification of Stalin. Benjamin said that he had been sure about what Brecht thought of Stalin since the summer of 1938. Ibid., p.64.

134 SW3, p.337.

135 Ibid., p.340.

136 Letter to Max Horkheimer from 3 August 1939, in Rolf Tiedemann, 'Historical Materialism or Political Materialism? An Interpretation of the Theses "On the Concept of History",' trans. by Barton Byg, Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones, in Gary Smith, ed., *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics* (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 1989), p.193.

137 Letter to Margarete Steffin from 12 December 1936, Ibid., n208. After reading the book, his reviews were more positive and he found Gide's insights about the role of religion in the Soviet Union to be very rewarding.

138 Letter to Horkheimer from 3 August 1939, Ibid., p.193.

source of his greatness—an attempt that would do credit to Heidegger.'[139] In a letter to Gretel Adorno from Brecht's residence in Denmark in 1938, Benjamin recognised how disturbed he was by this review that hewed to the party line. He described the publication and his characterisation as a follower of Heidegger as 'quite wretched.'[140] Benjamin told her that Bloch, Brecht and himself were trying to make sense of what was behind Soviet cultural politics, but they agreed that the theoretical and political line taken in Moscow was 'catastrophic for everything we have championed for twenty years.'[141] As a proof of the catastrophic consequences of all this, Benjamin told her the news he had received some days before, that Tretiakov was probably no longer alive. In a nutshell, Brecht and Benjamin had no power or influence over cultural politics in Moscow. To the question of whether Brecht had friends in Moscow, he replied to Benjamin: 'Actually, I have no friends there at all. And the Muscovites themselves don't have any either—like the dead.'[142] When Brecht qualified the Soviet state as a 'worker's monarchy,' Benjamin 'drew an analogy between such an organism and the grotesque freaks of nature which, in the shape of horned fish or other monsters, are brought to light from out of the deep sea.'[143] To push this metaphor further, we could argue that Benjamin's longing for the creation of a collective body in the giant laboratory of the Soviet Union was shattered. Instead, as a consequence of the *betrayal* of the ideas that informed the revolution, a grotesque monster had arisen.

In the context of his anthropological materialism, Benjamin sought to find in art a space to accomplish the political task of successfully adapting technology into the social body. Thus, his call for the politicisation of art aimed at transforming the literary techniques of art forms in order to meet the purposes of a technology liberated from ritual functions before this technological innervation. The final goal, as in his politics, was to pursue happiness in bodily life. The articles that Benjamin wrote on the Russian cultural scene after his stay in Moscow are especially illuminating in this regard, as is his later essay 'The Author as Producer.' According

[139] Alfred Kurella, 'Deutsche Romantik,' in *Internationale Literatur*, no.6 (1938), pp. 113-28; in Wizisla, p.60.
[140] Letter to Gretel Adorno from 20 July 1938, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p.572.
[141] Ibid.
[142] 'Diary Entries, 1938,' SW3, p.339.
[143] Ibid., p.340.

to this latter essay, it could be argued that the politicisation Benjamin defended—apart from Brecht's—was the one carried out by the *Lef* group. The defence of Tretiakov was a particular case of refunctioning or functional transformation of a genre which Benjamin valued as politically/aesthetically positive. Nonetheless, it cannot be argued that Benjamin was an unconditional supporter of this group. Some claims of the productivists—among them Vertov and Tretiakov—were too uncritical in their praise for technology, defending sometimes exploitative practices in the name of technology and progress and falling, therefore, into technological determinism. For Benjamin, art should be understood historically, in connection with its living context. This context had changed its coordinates with the arrival of the technologies of reproduction. In the case of film, Benjamin considered that its political tendency was manifest in its technological basis, since social relations were inherent to the very nature of the medium. For an operativist use of film technology, the artist should consider him-/herself a worker, using his/her technology of reproduction to show an improved relationship (interplay) between the collective and (first and second) nature. Finally, those films which were good technically and politically should not disregard the next stage of the revolution, in which films should also address the vital concerns of the individual. Probably this ideal film would be for Benjamin a good comedy which knew how to deal ironically with the relation of Soviet man to technology—in the same way as had happened in the United States with Charlie Chaplin. Nonetheless, before I proceed to analyse Chaplin, I would like to address Benjamin's views on German cinema from the standpoint of a comparison that he drew in 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz' between *Battleship Potemkin* and the use of mass movements in UFA films.

## Chapter 3

## German Film: The *Geist* of Technology

In this chapter, I will analyse Benjamin's perspective on German cinema in the Weimar Republic and under National Socialism. The 'Work of Art' essay has often been used to analyse the films of Leni Riefenstahl as case studies in the aestheticisation of politics.[1] However, Benjamin never mentioned any film by Riefenstahl and probably never saw one. Yet this does not diminish such analyses. In fact, the 'Work of Art' essay offers invaluable tools with which to criticise and counteract the use of film technology made by fascism. Nonetheless, I will argue that Benjamin's theory of the aestheticisation of politics must be traced back to his preoccupation with the reception of technology in Germany. For this reason, I will closely analyse 'Theories of German Fascism' (1930), an essay in which Benjamin introduces his critique of the aestheticisation of politics within a broader critique of the doomed conception of technology adopted by the German right. Through the optic of anthropological materialism, I will also situate this argument about the aestheticisation of politics, made possible in many respects by the film apparatus,

[1] From the point of view of Benjamin's ideas about fascism, see Gerhard Richter's article 'Face-Off,' in *Monatshefte,* vol. 90, no. 4 (Winter, 1998) and the first chapter of his book, 'Benjamin's Face: Defacing Fascism,' in *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000); for a focus on Riefenstahl and the questions that arise from her work, see Linda Schulte-Sasse, 'Leni Riefenstahl's Feature Films and the Question of a Fascist Aesthetic,' in *Cultural Critique,* no.18 (1991), pp.123-148. Both authors address the question of the aestheticisation of politics carried out by fascism and theorised by Benjamin. Although Richter does not focus only on Riefenstahl, she is analysed as representing the faces of the *Volk* with 'the illusionary perfection of a beautiful and politically eroticized Aryan countenance.' Richter, 'Face-Off,' p.420. For a broader analysis of Leni Riefenstahl, although always informed by Benjamin, see the chapter 'Leni and Walt: Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft' in Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London, New York: Verso, 2002), pp.123-157. Lutz Peter Koepnick has analysed in depth the aesthetics of fascism theorised by Benjamin in his book *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*. He defines the aestheticisation of politics detected by Benjamin 'as both at once a fallacious strategy of transgression and as a false and ideological insistence on political autonomy and differentiation under the condition of modern industrial culture.' (p.31) Koepnick laments that Benjamin's comments on visual culture under fascist rule disregard the role of entertainment film and focus, instead, only on propaganda films à la Leni Riefenstahl; although, 'strangely enough,' Benjamin does not mention her name at all. Nonetheless, Koepnick takes Riefenstahl as an example for his analysis of fascist cinematography and fascist aesthetics in general. Lutz Peter Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

within his debates on the new aesthetics—i.e. sense perception—brought about by film. To be sure, Benjamin did not write much about German cinema. Among the different versions of the 'Work of Art' essay, he only mentions one German film, *Frederick the Great*, in the earliest, handwritten text, as an example of a historical film, without providing any further details or analysis of it. In 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' the article in which he defends *Battleship Potemkin*, Benjamin makes a more valuable (although vague) remark about the films produced by the Universum Film AG, the major German film company better known as UFA. There Benjamin criticises the monumental quality of the representation of mass movements in these films, in comparison to the architectonic quality of *Battleship Potemkin*. In the latter film, Benjamin praises the camera's ability to disclose and articulate the new nature of the collective as a revolutionary agent and its relation to its physical surroundings. The films of the UFA studio, by contrast, treated the collective as a compact mass. I will suggest that we can draw a comparison between Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer in the sense that both discerned a fascistic organisation of the masses in UFA films.

I want to argue in this chapter that Benjamin's critique of the use made of technological reproduction by fascism cannot be fully understood without a deeper analysis of his preoccupation with the failed reception of technology in Germany. For this reason, I will situate his writings on film as part of this broader concern with the uses and abuses of technology. Hence, the aim of this chapter is to analyse the different visions of technology which proliferated in Germany after its defeat in World War I and how these visions affected the production and reception of film. Benjamin revealed his fears about the failed reception of technology in Germany in different texts. In 'Experience and Poverty' (1933) and 'The Storyteller' (1936) Benjamin repeats almost verbatim a fragment in which he talks about the traumatic effects of the First World War on soldiers and the civil population, which caused a rupture in their life experience. Both essays talk about two sides of the same problem, but from different perspectives. On the one hand, 'Experience and Poverty,' even while it mourns the loss of experience in twentieth-century modernity, also perceives the positive side of such a loss, championing thus the rupture with tradition and hailing new forms of cultural production. On the other hand, 'The Storyteller' is a

more obvious lamentation of the decay of experience and the faculty for telling stories.

> Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience? What poured out in the flood of war books ten years later was anything but experience that can be shared orally. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been more thoroughly contradicted than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horsedrawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.[2]

In this fragment, Benjamin reflects on the sudden changes to which human beings had to adapt after the war. He is particularly worried about the capacity of the human body to respond to those rapid and traumatic changes. I have already introduced, through the term 'anthropological materialism,' the argument that Benjamin sought to understand the human body historically and, thus, the changes of the human sensorium according to a historically- and class-conditioned technological development. He characterises the human body as the source of all experience. The human body appears in this picture, however, as tiny and fragile, amidst a field of destruction. In the bungled reception of technology that Benjamin describes in the fragment above, bodily experience has been negated by mechanical warfare. As he states, many books on the experience of the soldiers in the war appeared in the years after the armed conflict. However, the experience they were talking about was short experience (*Erlebnis*), in this case referred to as 'experience in the front' (*Fronterlebnis*), which could not be incorporated into long experience (*Erfahrung*). In the essay 'Theories of German Fascism' Benjamin attacks one of these books,

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[2] 'Experience and Poverty,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.2, part 2, 1931-1924 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp.731, 732; 'The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.3, 1935-1938 (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.144.

*Krieg und Krieger* (1930), harshly. The essays collected in this book understood warfare technology in quasi-mystical terms, as separated from social relations, and praised it for its destructive and annihilating character.

In contrast to these books, Benjamin found the Russian book *Der Russe redet* (1923) written by Ssofja Fedortschenko very rewarding. This book is a collection of pieces of conversations and stories told by Russian soldiers at the front, presented by the writer without any footnotes, dates or names. Benjamin describes it as 'the most candid and positive book the war has brought forth.'[3] In his review of the book for *Die literarische Welt* in November 1926, Benjamin claimed that the writer, by listening to the heart in the voices of these Russian soldiers, had succeeded in capturing the true face of the war.[4]

In this chapter I want to analyse Benjamin's reading of the historical role that film—especially regarding its technological and collective nature—performed in the Weimar Republic and during National Socialism. For that reason, I will focus primarily on the relation between technology and the masses. As I have already argued, Benjamin understood that technology should be a mediator between human beings and nature, allowing a playful relation between both. He understood the relation among human beings, technology and nature to be reciprocal, leading to a positive relation of interplay. However, capitalism and the First World War had exploited technology for the imperialistic, destructive domination of nature and humanity. In this way, Benjamin understood the class revolts after the First World War as attempts to bring the collective body organised in technology under control. Only technology unfettered from capitalist and imperialistic exploitation could perform the required interplay between humanity and nature.

[3] Letter to Gerhard Scholem, 5 March 1926. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin (1910-1940)*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.294, 295.

[4] *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.3, ed. by Hella Tiedemann-Bartels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), p.49

**‘Theories of German Fascism’**

I want to focus now on the essay ‘Theories of German Fascism,’ because I think it is crucial to understanding Benjamin’s later critique of the aestheticisation of politics in the ‘Work of Art’ essay. In this article, Benjamin argues that technology was sufficiently developed to master the social forces of society. However, German society did not prove mature enough to make technology its organ and used it instead as a destructive, cultic power—as the authors of *Krieg und Krieger* make clear.[5] In the article, Benjamin reviews this collection of essays edited by the essayist and novelist Ernst Jünger, one of the leading figures of the intellectual radical right in the Weimar Republic. According to Benjamin, these essays mystify the vision of war and experience at the front. The most relevant essay of this collection was Jünger’s ‘Total Mobilisation.’ There, Jünger claims that in the last war the genius of war was penetrated for the first time by the spirit of progress. However, he argues that this progress cannot be understood merely as the product of reason. Rather, it was a spirit (*Geist*) that propelled that progress; for only a cultic power or belief could expand ‘the perspective of utility [*Zweckmässigkeit*] into the infinite.’[6] His idea of ‘total mobilisation’ is drawn in opposition to the ‘partial mobilisation’ of past wars, which rested on the exclusive right of the monarchy to call for such mobilisation and on the duty and the prerogative of professional soldiers. This responsibility, says Jünger, now lies in everyone able to bear arms. Indeed, as the costs of waging war drastically increase, a fixed war budget is no longer sufficient. It is necessary to keep the machinery of the state and industry in motion and, thus, ‘the image of war as armed combat merges into the more extended image of a gigantic labor process [*Arbeitsprozesses*].’[7] Jünger claims that, apart from the army that fights on the battlefields, with ‘total mobilisation’ an army of labour emerges. As a distillation of the argument that he would present two years later in his book *Der Arbeiter*, he argues that we no longer have wars of kings, knights and citizens, but ‘wars of *workers*.’[8] Thus, with the term ‘total mobilisation,’ he wants to translate the functioning of war into society. Workers would be like soldiers, keen to sacrifice

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[5] ‘Theories of German Fascism,’ *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.2, part 1, 1927-1930 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.312.
[6] Ernst Jünger, ‘Total Mobilization,’ in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy*, trans. by Joel Golb and Richard Wolin (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 1993), p.124.
[7] Ibid., p.126.
[8] Ibid., p.128. Italics in the original.

themselves for a greater goal. Jünger conceives the deployment of technology in this mobilisation in terms of energy—in a manner, therefore, not very different from Benjamin. He views this mobilisation as a conversion of life into energy, as an unlimited marshalling of potential energies 'that requires extension to the deepest marrow, life's finest nerve.'[9] Like Benjamin, Jünger understands the reception of technology as an innervation into the body of society. However, the energy that Jünger plans to innervate into the collective is not a positive, therapeutic rush of energy; he rather wants to direct the release of energy in modern life into martial energy. If Jünger found something attractive in Soviet Russia, it was precisely the regularisation and militarisation of labour by the State: 'the Russian "five-year plan" presented the world with an attempt to channel the collective energies of a great empire into a *single* current.'[10] Thus, Jünger praises the maxim of production for production's sake, rather than the outcome of such production and its distribution. The same holds true for his glorification of war. He is not concerned with the ends for which the war is waged, but with the intrinsic and essentialist value of war as an end in itself. For this reason, Benjamin argues that this book translates the principles of *l'art pour l'art* to war.[11] In fact, Jünger argues that wars are like cathedrals or pyramids, 'possessing the special quality of "uselessness" [*Zwecklosigkeit*]' and, therefore, economical reasons are not sufficient to explain them. Rather, he suggests, one should focus on phenomena of a cultic variety. Benjamin sees here the transformation of war into myth and the aestheticisation of politics carried out by fascism—which he will later develop in the 'Work of Art' essay. Jeffrey Herf argues that Jünger transforms art for art's sake into 'production for the production's sake' and 'destruction for destruction's sake.' War appears, then, as its own and only possible end.[12]

In the light of these ideas, Benjamin declares that we have a 'last chance to correct the incapacity of peoples to order their relationships to one another in accord with the relationship they possess to nature through their technology.' If this effort fails, says Benjamin (anticipating the Second World War), 'millions of human bodies will

[9] Ibid., p.126.
[10] Ibid., p.127. Italics in the original.
[11] 'Theories of German Fascism,' SW2, p.314.
[12] Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.94, 95.

indeed inevitably be chopped to pieces and chewed up by iron and gas.'[13] Benjamin here states very clearly that technology should be used to mediate the relationship between humanity and nature. The authors of the essays under consideration, however, approached technology as something mysterious, if not mystical. They failed to see that the goal of technology was precisely to help human beings. As I introduced in the first chapter, technology was understood by Benjamin as pertaining to the political, a sphere in which the happiness of humankind is the ultimate goal, therefore the telos of technology should be happiness. Benjamin argues that because of the mystification of nature made by those authors influenced by Ludwig Klages (here Benjamin attempts to distance himself from this author belonging to the Stefan George circle, who had a great influence on him), they failed to see 'in technology not a fetish of doom but a key to happiness.'[14] Jünger and company approached technology from its destructive side and saw the destruction and annihilation caused by technology as an end in itself. To bring up an image from the section 'To the Planetarium' in *One-Way Street*, Jünger would be the cane wielder who thinks that the purpose of education is the mastery of children; and by the same token, the one who thinks that the purpose of technology is the mastery of nature and, consequently, also of man.

Benjamin defines the ideas presented in this collection of essays as theories of German fascism. As I will argue, the theories developed by these right-wing intellectuals had an influence on National Socialist ideas on technology and war. The National Socialist credo on technology was not simple or coherent and there were different opinions about the role that technology should play in their political programme. Whereas National Socialism promoted the ideal return to a golden national past and to a communion between man and nature, many believed that this move should not represent a return to a pastoral machineless epoch, but rather should be a correlative of the modernisation of the country with industry, trains, highways and media. This position was primarily based on the writings of some conservative intellectuals from the Weimar period who have been labelled by Jeffrey Herf as 'reactionary modernists'—Jünger being the leading member of this group. These thinkers argued for the compatibility of incorporating technology to German

[13] 'Theories of German Fascism,' SW2, pp.320, 321.
[14] Ibid., p.321.

nationalism and claimed that their technology was an organic part of German culture. Herf claims that this current of thought was 'a reconciliation between the antimodernist, romantic, and irrationalist ideas present in German nationalism and the most obvious manifestation of means-ends rationality, that is, modern technology.'[15] These thinkers had in mind a new, beautiful order in which Germany would turn from the chaotic state of capitalism into a united, technologically advanced country. German Romanticism and technology were thus combined, proposing a possible reconciliation between technology and spirit. Joseph Goebbels labelled the epoch of National Socialism 'steel-like Romanticism' (*stählernde Romantik*) in a direct reference to this reconciliation.[16] These thinkers wanted 'the triumph of spirit and will over reason and the subsequent fusion of this will to an aesthetic mode.'[17] In their aesthetics, they promoted a fascination with war and violence as masculine values to counter the decadence and effemination of the bourgeoisie. By aestheticising politics, they thought they would resolve this crisis of decadence and decline. This vision contributed to an irrational and nihilist embrace of technology by right-wing intellectuals, which was subsequently celebrated by National Socialism. The Nazi party clearly shared many of Jünger's ideas. Nonetheless, when Goebbels tried to recruit Jünger, the latter rejected the offer because the National Socialists were far too plebeian for him. Jünger was too much of an elitist to take part in a mass movement.[18]

Benjamin perceived in the idealistic language of these authors an attempt to redeem an idealistic nature through technology. Jeffrey Herf argues that the principal contribution of Benjamin's article was to understand 'that for Germany's right-wing intellectuals, the "liberation" of technology from Weimar's social and political restrictions was synonymous with recovery of the German soul.'[19] Hence, Benjamin argued that the redemption of nature defended by Jünger and company was unmediated and mystical. For him, technology could give nature a voice and illuminate its mystery. In 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (1916), Benjamin describes nature as mute, as speechless. However, this nature is

[15] Herf, *Reactionary Modernism,* p.1.
[16] Ibid, pp.2, 3.
[17] Ibid., p.12.
[18] Ibid., p.107.
[19] Ibid., p.32.

permeated with the residue of the language of God: 'soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth.'[20] The language of nature is nameless, but human beings are able to give her names according to the communication they receive from her—in the form of a speechless language. Benjamin illustrates the language of nature as the password that one sentry passes to the next in his own language. The meaning of this password, however, says Benjamin, is the language of the sentry itself.[21] When in 'Theories of German Fascism' he returns to the same argument, he argues that technology can give nature a voice. This argument is similar to that which I presented in the first chapter with regard to the 'optical unconscious.' There, Benjamin argues that technology can articulate the speech of 'second nature'; here, instead, he refers primarily to 'first nature.' In both cases, though, the mediation of technology is central. In his early theory of language, he had already indicated that after the fall of man, every communication is mediated and, thus, the word must be conceived of as a means.[22] Through technological reproduction the mediation of the apparatus, as a means, is even more obvious. The authors reviewed in 'Theories of German Fascism,' however, pursue an unmediated relation to nature and praise the heroic, destructive potential of technology vis-à-vis nature, which—as it could not be otherwise—remains mute.

### The *Kunstspolitik* of the 'Work of Art' Essay

In a letter to Max Horkheimer, Benjamin defined the aim of the 'Work of Art' essay as follows: 'These reflections attempt to give the questions raised by art theory a truly contemporary form: and indeed from the inside, avoiding any *unmediated* reference to politics.'[23] Thus, Benjamin wanted to analyse how politics had reached a point at which it could not be understood without the mediation of a technological apparatus. Art, in its technological mediation, was in turn immersed in politics. Any claim for unmediated and autonomous art was consequently regarded as suspicious. The 'Work of Art' essay aimed to provide a theoretical framework with which to

[20] 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.1, 1913-1926 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.69.
[21] Ibid., p.74.
[22] Ibid., p.72.
[23] Letter to Max Horkheimer, from 16 October 1935. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p.509. Italics in the original.

fight the rise of fascism in Europe by understanding and unmasking its use of technology—and especially of film technology. Under the pressure of the current events (*Aktualität*), Benjamin defined the tendencies of the development of art under contemporary conditions of production in order to contribute to the political struggle. In this case he did not focus on the tendencies of art under the conditions of a proletarian seizure of power, as he did in the case of Russian art, but explored the uses and abuses of the technology of reproduction under fascism and capitalism. To that end, the theses developed in the essay sought to 'neutralize a number of traditional concepts—such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—which, used in an uncontrolled way (and controlling them is difficult today), allow factual material to be manipulated in the interests of fascism.'[24] Thus, the essay aimed to unmask the use made by fascism of the technologies of reproduction by proving that those old concepts were no longer applicable to the new technological art forms. At the same time, Benjamin sought to refunction those practices for the purpose of human liberation. In the words of Esther Leslie, Benjamin's contribution to *Kunstspolitik* was to ground a strategy 'for a political critical practice' which would reinvent the relations of artistic production through a revolutionary approach to technology.[25]

In the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin claims that the technologies of reproduction revolutionised the social character of art and, therefore, notions such as originality, eternity or distance could no longer be associated with these media. In traditional art, the uniqueness of a work of art formed its aura ('A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.'[26]). Thus, the authority of such an artwork was always attached to the *hic et nunc* of the object. Benjamin argues that the embededness of the artwork in its own context of tradition, that is, in its particular here and now, originally found expression in cult value. In this way, says Benjamin, 'the artwork's auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function.'[27] In reproducible art, however, authenticity ceases to be an artistic factor. Hence, argues Benjamin, 'the technology of reproduction detaches the

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[24] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (second version), SW3, p.101.
[25] Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto, 2000), pp.132, 133.
[26] 'Work of Art,' SW3, pp.104, 105. This is the definition of aura given in the 'Work of Art' essay. For more definitions of this concept, see footnote 33 below.
[27] Ibid., p.105. Italics in the original.

reproduced object from the sphere of tradition.'[28] For Benjamin, film is the most important agent for the shattering and liquidation of the value of tradition in cultural heritage. No doubt as a provocateur, he claims that the great historical films, in their 'celluloid resurrection' of heroes, myths and historical figures, are the most obvious examples of 'this comprehensive liquidation.' In the first version, Benjamin names four of these epic films: *Cleopatra* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1934), *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* (dir. Fred Niblo, 1925), *Napoleon* (dir. Abel Gance, 1927) and *Frederick the Great* (dir. Arzén von Cserépy, 1922-1923).[29] It is worth noting that Kracauer posited the latter film as an exemplary case of the authoritarian tendency in his history of Weimar film and described it as 'pure propaganda for a restoration of the monarchy.'[30] According to Kracauer, this epic film aimed to convince the audience that a patriarchal figure such as Frederick was the most effective antidote against socialism and a means by which to realise Germany's nationalist aspirations.[31] Despite the reactionary politics of the film, Benjamin suggests that technological reproducibility would strip a figure such as Frederick the Great of his aura.[32]

In her 2008 essay 'Benjamin's Aura,' Miriam Hansen argues that, because of the polemical conception of the term and of Adorno's influence, Benjamin ended up using aura as an aesthetic category. This is the most common understanding of the term; however, Benjamin did not understand aura only in that way.[33] For example, in

[28] Ibid., p.104.
[29] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (first version), trans. by Michael W. Jennings, *Grey Room* 39, special issue 'Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art' (Spring, 2010), p.15. The four parts of *Fridericus Rex* are *Sturm und Drang* (1922), *Vater und Sohn* (1922), *Sanssouci* (1923) and *Schicksalswende* (1923).
[30] Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of German Film*, ed. by Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.115.
[31] Ibid., p.116.
[32] This point is similar to Benjamin's argument that the aura surrounding Macbeth cannot be dissociated from the aura that, for the audience, surrounds the actor ('Work of Art,' SW3, p.112). For him, this fact proves that there is no facsimile of the aura. These two arguments, however, are at odds with the underlying supposition that both fascism and capitalism fabricate simulated auras.
[33] In this essay, Hansen argues that there are at least two semantically different definitions of aura in Benjamin's work: (1) from 'Little History of Photography' and the 'Work of Art' essay: 'a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be'; and (2) from 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire': 'aura understood as a form of perception that "invests" or endows a phenomenon with the "ability to look back at us," to open its eyes or "lift its gaze."' These two definitions are conjoined in *The Arcades Project* when he invokes his 'definition of aura as the distance of the gaze that awakens in the object looked at' (pp.339, 340). Hansen also pays attention to another definition of aura in one of

a definition of 1930 he argued that genuine aura appeared in all things. In the 'Work of Art' essay, however, Benjamin assimilates aura to the grammar of 'beautiful semblance' (*schöner Schein*). Thus, the singular status of the traditional work of art, conformed by its authority, authenticity and unattainability, was epitomised by this term. In the footnote in which Benjamin explains 'beautiful semblance' in reference to Goethe, he roots this concept in the age of auratic perception that, he says, is coming to an end. Benjamin quotes a definition of beauty from his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*: 'The beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil.'[34] For him, this definition is the quintessence of the ancient aesthetic.[35] According to Hansen, 'the veil defines both the condition of beauty and its essential unavailability,' that is, a symbolic integrity upon which Benjamin had already predicated his definition of aura. Therefore, Benjamin assimilates aura here to a fetishist cult of 'beautiful semblance'—which is no longer possible in technologically reproducible art. It is only in this particular conception of aura, suggests Hansen, that Benjamin calls for its active demolition. As I argue above, in the discussion about the performance of the actor and the polarity play/semblance, Benjamin claimed that, with the emergence of film, art has escaped the realm of 'beautiful semblance.' The problem was that both fascism and capitalism tried to encapsulate a simulated aura—understood in relation to 'beautiful semblance'—for mass production. For that reason, as part of his *Kunstspolitik*, Benjamin tried to spot the technologically enhanced fabrication of auratic effects in cinema in both capitalist and fascist productions, and in their reception.[36] Hence, he accused film

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his essays on hashish in which Benjamin describes three aspects: 'First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine. Second, the aura undergoes changes, which can be quite fundamental, with every movement of the object whose aura it is. Third, genuine aura can in no sense be thought of as the spruced-up version of the magic rays beloved of spiritualists which we find depicted and described in vulgar works of mysticism. On the contrary, the distinctive feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo [*Umzirkung*], in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case [*Futteral*]' (p.358). Hansen claims that aura's epistemic structure appears reconceptualised and secularised in other concepts, such as 'profane illumination,' '*flânerie*,' 'mimetic faculty,' and 'optical unconscious' (p.338). Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin's Aura' in *Critical Inquiry*, no. 34 (Winter 2008), pp.336-375.

[34] 'Work of Art,' SW3, n127.

[35] 'The Significance of Beautiful Semblance,' SW3, p.137.

[36] In a letter to Werner Kraft, dated 28 October 1935, Benjamin writes with regard to the completion of the 'Work of Art' essay: 'I am busy pointing my telescope through the bloody mist at a mirage of the nineteenth century that I am attempting to reproduce based on the characteristics it will manifest in a future state of the world, liberated from magic.' Therefore,

capital (referring probably not only to Hollywood, but also to the UFA studio) of making a cult of the movie star, whose magic of celebrity 'has long been no more than the putrid magic of its own commodity character.'[37] Benjamin criticises in this way the simulated aura which was created by capitalism in order to exploit the commodity value of film. Benjamin argues that this phantasmagoria is developed by the capitalistic publicity machine, placing the careers and love lives of the stars in public, organising polls and holding beauty contests.[38]

Benjamin argues that there are two poles in every artwork: on the one hand, cult value, and on the other, exhibition value. Historical changes produce shifts in the balance between these two poles. According to him, technologies of reproduction have produced an emancipation of the artwork from the service of ritual and, in turn, have increased the possibilities for exhibition. Additionally, Benjamin claims that authenticity ceases to be a criterion for artistic production. For these two reasons, the social function of art, instead of being based on ritual, is now based on politics. In that regard, Benjamin criticises some cases in early film theory and in contemporary film reviews in which commentators tried to attribute elements of cult and supernatural significance to film, such as in the hyperbolic remarks of Abel Gance or Franz Werfel's review of Max Reinhardt's film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935).[39] Although in film exhibition value prevails over cult value, Benjamin argues that the ritualistic basis of art is still present, even in the most profane cults of beauty. One of the responses to the advent of the technology of reproduction and its manifest political basis was the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*. This teleology of art rejected any social function, turning the means (art) into an end in itself. Thus, the authors who defended this doctrine sought to avoid the pre-

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the aim of Benjamin was clearly to dispel any vestige of ritual and magic that still endured in art. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p.516.

37 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.112.

38 Ibid., p.114. This argument is similar to Adorno's in his critique of the 'culture industry.' For Adorno, the culture industry 'lives parasitically from the extra-artistic technique of the material production of goods.' One of these extra-artistic techniques is the manufacture of the star system, which is borrowed from individualistic art and exploited for commercial purposes. In short, the culture industry, in the creation of stardom, blends the precision and rationalisation of capitalism with an adapted romanticism—in the form of individualistic residues and sentimentality. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered,' in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001), p.101.

39 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.110.

eminently political nature of film by maintaining the bourgeois antithesis of pure art and tendentious art and situating themselves in the former.

National Socialism also exploited auratic features in the service of ritual. Through mass rallies and parades, Nazis created auratic effects on a grand scale in order to develop a corrupted cult of the masses. Thus, argues Benjamin, instead of granting the masses rights, fascism only granted them expression.[40] The masses became an aesthetic ornament as an end in itself, so that property relations remained unchanged. National Socialism aestheticised life and politics with its mass rallies and with the film apparatus. Benjamin was aware of the suitability of the film apparatus for this purpose, as he wrote in a footnote:

> mass movements are more clearly apprehended by the camera than by the eye. A bird's-eye view best captures assemblies of hundreds of thousands. … This is to say that mass movements, and above all war, are a form of human behaviour especially suited to the camera.[41]

The apparently optimistic claims about the nature of the medium itself in the fragments on the 'optical unconscious' in 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz' and the 'Work of Art' essay give way to a more ambivalent stance here in which Benjamin recognises the aptness of the film apparatus to convey a corrupted representation of the masses. As I will argue below, Benjamin thought that, although the medium provided a new prism through which to see the world, whether such material was to be articulated correctly depended ultimately on its representation. Through the guidance of the camera, the Nazi mass rallies could acquire an aesthetic, monumental quality. Hence, Benjamin recognises that the aestheticisation of politics undertaken by fascism was made far easier by the eye of the camera.

In a footnote to the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin presents the crisis of the democracies as a crisis in the conditions of the representation of politicians. With the appearance of technologies of reproduction such as film and radio, the politician is not only speaking in front of parliament, but an unlimited number of members of the public. This historical change gives priority to the presentation of the politician in the media. In this way, the politician must acquire controllable and transferable skills to

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[40] Ibid., p.121.
[41] Ibid., n132.

exhibit before the recording equipment. The politician, similarly to the film actor, knows that he is speaking to an unlimited number of people, rather than to the members of parliament. Thus, the representation of politics goes into crisis, for it cannot follow the same parameters as in the past. The result, Benjamin concludes, is a new form of selection: a selection before the apparatus 'from which the champion, the star, and the dictator emerge as victors.'[42] Hitler was aware of the importance of staging his performance in front of the camera and the masses. For that reason, from 1932, Hitler practised facial expressions and trained his voice under the direction of the opera singer Paul Devrient. The expressions Hitler practised in front of a mirror were, according to Susan Buck-Morss, genuine expressions of an intact ego. In this way, she argues, they were reflective and tried to make the masses see themselves reflected on Hitler's persona.[43] The historical, political role of film was to increase the number of people who could recognise in Hitler the illusion of an intact, armoured ego which promised to solve the fear of a fragmented body. In the framework of anthropological materialism, we can argue that, whereas the Nazis promoted an armoured body to fight against the fragmentation of modernity, exploiting an illusion of harmony, Benjamin highlighted by contrast the fragmentary nature of film to counteract that myth. The collective and technologically transformed *physis* proposed by Benjamin is radically opposed to the rearmoured body of National Socialism.[44] Benjamin aimed to incorporate technology collectively in a non-destructive way, undoing the alienation of the body by passing through the very technologies that marked the impossibility of an unfragmented experience. National Socialism proposed instead an ascetic, annihilating experience of warfare as the only way to recover the unity of the body. The cult of Hitler thus came about through the myth of his persona as an intact ego. This myth was conveyed in the staged mass meetings and, more carefully performed, in films.

Benjamin established several rights that the film apparatus was able to provide the masses: the 'right' to transform property relations, the 'right' to view cultural

[42] Ibid., n128.
[43] Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered' in *October*, vol. 62 (Autumn, 1992), p.39.
[44] Compare also with the 'metalized body' of Marinetti in his manifesto on the Ethiopian War.

products that present an accurate vision of reality and the ‘right’ to be filmed.[45] National Socialism systematically distorted these rights and organised the newly proletarianised masses by giving them expression, while keeping property relations unchanged. In this way, thanks to the film apparatus, the Nazis gave an artistic (ritualistic) expression to the masses without conceding them rights. For this reason, Benjamin argues that fascism uses the new social opportunities opened up by the film apparatus in the interests of a property-owning minority. In this way, the illusionary displays organised in mass rallies and propaganda films are made to conceal unemployment while involving the masses. In the end, property relations remain intact. Benjamin thus provided one of the most valuable understandings of fascism at that time, taking seriously not only economic relations but also the use of technology for such purposes.[46] For Benjamin, the aestheticisation of politics could only lead to war—the most authentic aesthetic pleasure for many right-wing German intellectuals. The economic and technological reasons behind total mobilisation were that war made it possible to mobilise all technological resources and the labour force without changing property relations.

In another footnote to the ‘Work of Art’ essay, Benjamin provides a very important insight about the masses and introduces the relation of fascism and the petty bourgeoisie—a fragment which Adorno described as the best political commentary since Lenin’s *State and Revolution*.[47] Benjamin argues that in the solidarity of the proletarian class struggle, ‘the dead undialectical opposition between individual and mass is abolished.’[48] Whereas among proletarians there is the consciousness of a class, the petty bourgeoisie forms only a compact mass; thus, the action of the proletarian cadre is mediated by a task and obeys a collective *ratio*, while the action of the petty bourgeois mass is unmediated and reactive. The demonstrations of these

[45] Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, p.163.
[46] Many authors associated with the Frankfurt School also analysed the economic features of Nazism. For example, Adorno and Horkheimer understood Nazism as ‘State capitalism.’ Franz Neumann disagreed, however, and said that State capitalism was a contradiction in terms. He preferred to define the economics of the Nazi regime as ‘Totalitarian Monopoly Capitalism.’ See chapter 5, ‘The Institut’s Analysis of Nazism’ in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1996), pp.143-172.
[47] Letter from Adorno to Benjamin, 18 March 1936, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), pp.132, 133
[48] ‘Work of Art,’ SW3, n129.

compact masses, argues Benjamin, have a panicked quality, giving rein to war fever, hatred of Jews and the instinct of self-preservation. The Nazis mobilised compact masses, in which the antagonistic classes of proletariat and bourgeoisie were diluted, in order to give vent to the counterrevolutionary instincts of the bourgeoisie. According to Benjamin, National Socialism understood these laws and succeeded in inculcating in the masses nationalist and racist ideals with the promise of preserving property relations. Therefore, although appealing for social change, the fascist critique never questioned the relations of ownership. Even though the 1920 and 1926 party programmes of National Socialism included economic policies—even land expropriation—to help small businessmen, as early as 1928 Hitler abandoned the point of the programme about expropriation without indemnification in order to gain the support of the landed aristocracy—restricting it to Jewish real estate corporations.[49] Nazism used the petty bourgeoisie to take power by promising a solution to the crisis that kept its properties intact. In fact, National Socialism always lauded the big German entrepreneurs such as Alfred Krupp, Werner Siemens and August Thyssen. Franz Neumann, in his famous book *Behemoth*, characterised the National Socialist economy as a 'Totalitarian Monopoly Capitalism.' He argued that National Socialism could have used the state apparatuses to nationalise at least the new industries. However, National Socialism opted eventually to give financial help to long-established monopolies.[50]

In this section, I have analysed Benjamin's theses on technological reproduction to show how National Socialism resurrected the vestiges of auratic features of film art and put them at the service of the Hitler cult. Nevertheless, the corrupted representation of the masses, which reached a peak with Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (Triumph des Willens, 1935), originated earlier than the Nazis' rise to power. Benjamin detected the representation of collective movements as a compact mass in some UFA productions from the Weimar Republic. Hence, in the next section, I will analyse this representation of the masses in some films of the period, in accordance with Benjamin's analysis.

[49] Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933-1944* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), p.229.
[50] Ibid., p.280.

**The Monumental Quality of Mass Movements in UFA**

In the last chapter, I analysed 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz' in depth. In that essay, Benjamin draws an opposition between the representation of mass movements in the movies of the UFA studio, which gives the masses a monumental quality, and the architectonical quality of the mass movements in *Potemkin*. The architectonic character of Eisenstein's film is achieved by articulating collective movements in collective milieux through the mediation of the technological nature of film; whereas the monumental quality of UFA productions lies in its ornamental condition.[51] Benjamin views the representation of mass movements in *Potemkin* as positive because the undialectical relation between individual and collective is surpassed. The individuals shown by Eisenstein are acting collectively and, through the explosion of the space made by the penetration of the apparatus, can better understand both the collective spaces in which they live and themselves as a class. Their collective actions do not take agency away from individuals, but reinforce their class consciousness in their fight for social liberation. In this regard, in the 'Work of Art' essay Benjamin claims that the masses have an original and justified interest in film: 'an interest in understanding themselves and therefore their class.'[52] In contrast, film capital and fascism corrupt and distort this interest. This occurs, for example, when in some UFA productions, the monumental quality of these mass movements acquires the significance of a compact mass, and the ornamental aesthetics of these formations are an end in themselves.

Benjamin did not say which specific film or films from the UFA studios he was referring to. Nonetheless, Siegfried Kracauer, in his famous book on Weimar cinema *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), detects a similar problem in two films by Fritz Lang made for the UFA: *Die Nibelungen* (1924) and *Metropolis* (1927). In these films, Kracauer criticises the monumental excesses of Lang in the creation of mass ornaments, anticipating the same patterns that Nazi propaganda films would exploit a few years later. The representation of the masses in any of these two films could have been said to portray a 'monumental quality' and therefore could have been in Benjamin's mind when he composed his argument. Benjamin knew about the existence of the then-recently released film *Metropolis* when he wrote the article

[51] 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,' SW2, p.18.
[52] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.115.

about *Potemkin*, as is proved in 'Moscow Diary.' In this text, Benjamin mentions a conversation with Bernhart Reich about the poor reception of the film among intellectuals. This is all he says about the film:

> We talked about *Metropolis* and its poor reception in Berlin, at least among the intellectuals. Reich laid the responsibility for this failed experiment squarely on the shoulders of those intellectuals whose exaggerated expectations prompted these kinds of hazardous enterprises. I disagreed.[53]

Benjamin and Reich could only have known the film through reviews and could not have seen the film yet. *Metropolis* was premiered at the Ufa-Palast am Zoo cinema in Berlin on 10th January 1927, when Benjamin was already in Moscow. This conversation took place on 28th January, only a few days after the film's release. Benjamin, however, might have had the chance to see the film when he went back to Berlin on 1st February and before he submitted the article for publication—the article was published on 11th March. Nonetheless, apart from these lines, Benjamin never wrote any review of the film. In any case, if one pays attention to the dates and assesses the films which may have concerned Benjamin at that time, it is likely that he was referring to *Metropolis* in the article about *Potemkin*.

The concept 'mass ornament' was first used by Kracauer to refer to American entertainment spectacles such as the Tiller Girls.[54] These dancers, who formed geometrical figures in their performances, were conceived of by Kracauer as the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the capitalist system aspires. As such, in these patterns the girls are not considered as individuals, but as an indissoluble cluster of geometric precision in which the ornament is an end in itself. The bearer of the ornament is furthermore the mass and not the people (*Volk*). Although Kracuaer conducted this analysis with regard to a capitalist production which aimed at rationality and abstraction, it can be readily applied to the Nazi mass rallies. In these rallies, individuals were asked to submit themselves to higher ideals: community, nation and, eventually, war. Although National Socialism praised irrationality over the rationality of capitalism, the ornament of their aestheticisation of life functioned

[53] 'Moscow Diary,' *October*, vol. 35, special issue on 'Moscow Diary' (Winter, 1985), p.108.
[54] Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament,' in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.75-86.

as an end in itself in the same manner as the American entertainment shows analysed by Kracauer (the geometrical perfection of the Nazi mass rallies was in any case absolutely rational). When Kracauer uses the term 'mass ornament' with regard to Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, he stresses the authority which is expressed in such an arrangement. The vassals and slaves which form these ornaments in the film are arranged in order to create pleasing designs that denote omnipotence and give the impression of the irresistible power of destiny, which the film attempts to convey. According to Kracauer, these patterns would be copied in the Nazi organisation of the masses, creating enormous ornaments consisting of hundreds of thousands of particles. He cites Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* as a visual product which draws inspiration from Lang's film in order to show the mass ornaments as symbols of an absolute power.[55]

Thomas Elsaesser has argued that Benjamin's interpretation of the masses in the 'Work of Art' essay was indebted to Kracauer's analysis of the 'mass ornament' from the late 1920s. However, he claims that Benjamin's argument is more farsighted than Kracauer's when he reprises the concept of 'mass ornament' from *Caligari*. Elsaesser maintains that, whereas Benjamin is able to sketch in the uses of film made by capitalism and fascism 'both the counter-revolutionary function and the sources of pleasure associated with the new visual and aural media,' Kracauer does not analyse the consequences of technological reproduction and thus pays too little attention to technological mediation.[56]

[55] Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, pp.94, 95.

[56] Thomas Elsaesser, 'Cinema: The Irresponsible Signifier or "The Gamble with History": Film Theory or Cinema Theory,' *New German Critique*, no. 40, special issue on Weimar Film Theory (Winter, 1987), p.87. Kracauer's methodology in *From Caligari to Hitler* has been strongly criticised. For example, Leonardo Quaresima, in his introduction to the 2004 edition of the book, criticised Kracauer's choice of a socio-psychological perspective for his analysis, because according to him it led to simplification and to neglecting important aspects of individual films. Quaresima also criticises the fact that that, although the perspective is useful to interpret film as a symptom of the political and social situation, Kracauer does not define or develop the methodology he uses. (Leonardo Quaresima, 'Rereading Kracauer,' Introduction to *From Caligari to Hitler*). Stephen Brockman, on the other hand, has recently suggested that, although the criticisms of Kracauer's method are justified, both for his teleology and for his bold claims about film as the mirror of the German soul, his approach still offers an effective tool of enquiry with which to understand Weimar cinema and its significance. Stephen Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2010), p.3. Certainly, the socio-psychological perspective—manifest in the unfortunate subtitle of the book 'A Psychological History of the German Film'—is ambiguous to say the least and is not given a coherent explanation.

I will claim that the representation of the masses in *Metropolis* can easily be defined as portraying a 'monumental quality.' In the film, the city acts as an allegorical image of a contemporary city projected into a timeless future—clearly inspired by the skyline of Manhattan. The critique of the precarious condition of the working class is a critique of Taylorist scientific management and Fordist mass production. In fact, there is an awareness of class difference, which is emphasised in the division between the (blue-collar) workers' city below and the white-collar workers' and master's city above. This awareness not only of class difference, but also of exploitation, is nonetheless resolved through the motto which appears throughout the film: 'The mediator between head and hands must be the heart.' That is, by the reconciliation of workers and boss through the good-hearted Freder, who is none other than the son of the master of the city. The Christian-like prophet Maria foresees the arrival of a Messiah (eventually Freder) who must carry out the announced task of mediation between labour and capital. It is only after this call that the exploited masses react, following the plans of a leader, rather than acting independently. Furthermore, Maria is not questioning here the division of labour or inherent power relations, but instead claiming that the only problem is one of communication. The city-state is understood as a human body, that is, as an organic entity in which workers are conceived of as 'hands' and planners as 'brains.' However, the workers do not understand the noble motives of the planners while the

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Kracauer presents a connection between his psychological analysis and the social psychology of Erich Fromm, but the psychological methodology which is drafted in the introduction is irremediably lost in the text. Gertrud Koch argues that the theoretical argument of Kracauer is that films are 'cultural symbols in which the subjective characters that are developed function as markers for the collective identity.' Thus, she describes his approach as a social psychology with roots in a cultural anthropology. Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction*, trans. by Jeremy Gaines (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.80. The retrospective interpretation of many films from the Weimar period as an anticipation of National Socialism has also become the focus of strong criticism. Quaresima has argued that the retrospective interpretation of the films is the book's weakest point. Gertrud Koch also recognises that Kracauer's hermeneutic standpoint of telling 'the history of German film from the vantage point of its present end' is itself a methodological problem (Koch, p.77). Quaresima, nonetheless, recognises a process of derivation in this methodology. Thus, according to this method, it could be argued that National Socialism used some motifs from previous films (e.g. Riefenstahl drew inspiration from Lang's *Die Nibelungen* or from Arnold Fanck's mountain films). However, Quaresima disapproves the 'anticipationist' hypothesis of Kracauer and, in opposition to Sontag (see 'Fascinating Fascism'), claims that there cannot be an essential affinity between motifs used by, say, Fritz Lang and the ideology and aesthetics of National Socialism. I will contradict this latter idea of Quaresima by reading Lang's *Metropolis* through Benjamin and detecting some fascistic tropes in the film.

architects have no awareness of the workers' suffering.[57] The solution, according to the prophet Maria, comes about through the mutual understanding of both classes, but not through changing power relations. As we can see, the solution to the workers' exploitation is not resolved by changing existing property relations, but by reconciling labour and capital. This reconciliation comes through the mediation of the heart, which should be understood as the spirit. Therefore, by placing a spirit in the relation between labour and capital—whose relations are established through the means of production, i.e. the technology of production—the problems derived from capitalism are resolved. Certainly this was the position defended by fascism. In 'The Author as Producer' Benjamin presents a dichotomy in the relation of both fascism and communism to capitalism and its own crisis:

> The spirit that holds forth in the name of fascism *must* disappear. The spirit that, in opposing it, trusts in its own miraculous powers *will* disappear. For the revolutionary struggle is not between capitalism and spirit; it is between capitalism and the proletariat.[58]

Fascism criticises both capitalism and socialism because they lack a spirit, a *Geist*. For this reason, Benjamin denounces the spiritual terms of the fascist critique of capitalism. Hence he claims that a spiritual struggle against capitalism does not change property relations. The struggle must be, therefore, between capitalism and the proletariat.

Reading the film through Benjamin's theories on fascism, one cannot but agree with Kracauer's verdict of the film as proto-fascist. This analysis would thus dismiss subsequent readings that try to recuperate *Metropolis* as a great cinematographic achievement with a naive social-democrat/liberal content, as Elsaesser does.[59] Certainly the film is a remarkable cinematographic feat, but the film is also a visual exemplification of the organisation of the proletarianised masses by fascistic forces. According to Benjamin, fascism grants the masses expression without granting them rights: 'The masses have a *right* to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give

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[57] Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), p.57.
[58] 'The Author as Producer,' SW2, p.780. Italics in the original.
[59] See Thomas Elsaesser, *Metropolis* (London: British Film Institute, 2000).

them *expression* in keeping these relations unchanged.'[60] This is indeed the moral of the film. The masses of enslaved workers seem to agree with the final reconciliation, by which they reach an apparent harmony through the communication achieved between capital and labour (their exploitation is undoubtedly going to remain the same). Lang grants them expression in his monumental aesthetics, but not agency. The enslaved workers form ornamental patterns, which are pleasurable to the eye, but reduce the human implication of the individual to a minimum. Although these patterns represent the working class, the pompous ornaments eventually aestheticise a rebellion that brings about the establishment of a totalitarian authority.[61] In contrast to the representation of the masses made in *Potemkin*, here we have a compact mass which reacts to the populist, naive slogans of a prophet. That is, the mass does not act following a collective ratio which would lead individuals to liberation. For this reason, there is no real class consciousness, even though class differences are obvious. This fact permits Freder to sympathise easily with the masses, without feeling the need to become part of the movement.

Tom Gunning argues that in *Metropolis* Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou understand technology as a form of magic. Thus, technology is endowed with a demonic power capable of creation and destruction. For example, the creation of the robot to replace Maria is done by imagistic and metaphorical means, rather than by technological ones.[62] The Moloch machine is presented as a fearful creature which requires the sacrifice of human beings. Although the film also shows an enthusiasm for technological innovation, it does not present a scenario whereby the enslaved workers might make technology their ally. Technology is always presented as something mysterious, unpredictable and to be feared. Lang seeks a possible reconciliation between a modernised society and the old spirit of the German nation, represented in the scenery by the two anachronistic Gothic buildings, the inventor Rotwang's house and the cathedral. There is, then, a tension between the Gothic elements and modernity. The collision is resolved through the rational ends of technology, but technology does not demystify this spirit. The use of technology is,

[60] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.121. Italics in the original.
[61] This is how Kracauer reads the final reconciliation between the boss, Joh Fredersen, and a privileged representative of the workers, the foreman of the Heart Machine, Grot. *Caligari*, p.164.
[62] Gunning, pp.65-67.

therefore, not presented as responding to the purposes of a class, but rather as a mythical and fearful force. In summary, this technology is understood as 'first technology.' Therefore, it exists only in fusion with ritual and culminates in human sacrifice—the industrial machinery, equated in this film with Moloch (an ancient Semitic god which must be honoured by human sacrifices), is the epitome of this conception of technology.

The reconciliation of modern technology and spirit was also pursued in the production of the film. Regarding the lavish production of the film carried out by the UFA studio, Lang said that with *Metropolis* 'the technology of motion pictures which the Americans understood pragmatically would be given a "spirit," a meaning and significance Hollywood films lacked.'[63] This spirit that the UFA productions gave German films was in the line of a common sentiment with regard to technology in Germany. As Jeffrey Herf suggests, many engineers thought that German technology was superior and belonged to the *Kulturnation*. The reconciliation between modern technology and German national essence thus came about through the spirit. This was the same misconception that Benjamin detected in fascism and which was used to conceal the material reality of class difference.

The monumental quality of *Metropolis* turns the masses into ornamental patterns as an end in itself. Thus, the film solves the problem of exploitation by aestheticising the masses, without arousing class consciousness in them. They form a compact mass and have a reactive character. Therefore, they respond easily to any 'charlatan' who promises them a better life, even if the political programme is completely irrational and calls for a harmonious union with capital. Certainly these masses are part of the proletariat, but they are mobilised as a compact mass and thus react irrationally, instead of becoming conscious of their class and fighting to change the property relations which led to their exploitation. I will suggest—via Kracauer—that Riefenstahl used a very similar representation of the masses.

[63] Ibid., p.53.

## Riefenstahl and Beautiful Semblance

*Triumph of the Will* was premiered in Germany in 1935, but it was not shown in Paris, where Benjamin was living at that time, until the 1937 Universal Exposition—hence later than the two first versions of the 'Work of Art' essay. There, the film was awarded the *Diplome de Grand Prix*. It is difficult to know if Benjamin ever saw the film or if, having the chance, he was keen to see it. In any case, the theses expressed in the 'Work of Art' essay provide us with valid tools with which to counteract the work of Riefenstahl.

Leni Riefenstahl was a typical case of a petty-bourgeois who was mobilised by Hitler's discourse. Riefenstahl argues that she was not seduced by the racist ideals of Hitler, but by the socialistic ideas of rescuing the country from the unemployment and misery of the early thirties.[64] These ideas, as I have analysed, were nothing but a false discourse to keep property relations intact. The 'social' ideas were empty, but dressed up by a ritualistic character which attracted many people. Riefenstahl was one of those shocked by Hitler's mise-en-scène and who could recognise in Hitler, as I have argued above, the image of an intact ego capable of bringing Germany out of its situation of misery. She tried to absolve herself of her role within National Socialism in the long debates about her work after the Second World War.[65] Her self-defence has always come from the idea that art and politics are separate entities which have nothing to do with each other. She was a fervent supporter of art for art's

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[64] Leni Riefenstahl mentions in her memoirs that she was so shocked when she first attended a Hitler rally that she felt the need to contact him personally. Riefenstahl tries to justify her reaction (and redeem herself of any accusation of racism) in the following terms: 'I unreservedly rejected his racist ideas; and therefore I could never have joined the National Socialist Party. However, I welcomed his socialist plans. The deciding factor for me was the possibility that Hitler could reduce the tremendous unemployment that had already made over six million Germans unhappy and desperate. In any case, his racism, many people thought, was only a theory and nothing but campaign rhetoric.' Leni Riefenstahl, *The Sieve of Time: The Memoirs of Leni Riefenstahl* (London: Quartet, 1992), pp.101, 102.

[65] In the 1960s and 1970s there was a revaluation of Riefenstahl by auteurists in the United States, Great Britain and France, and later in Germany. Susan Sontag severely criticised these attempts to redeem the figure of Riefenstahl in her article 'Fascinating Fascism.' Riefenstahl herself took part in her revaluation by publishing her memoirs in 1987 and participating in the more ambiguous documentary *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (Die Macht der Bilder: Leni Riefenstahl, dir. Ray Müller, 1993). More critically, although still with the aim of recovering the artistic quality of Riefenstahl's films, Eric Rentschler and Linda Schulte-Sasse have also revalued her work in the following articles: Rentschler's 'Fatal Attractions: Leni Riefenstahl's "The Blue Light",' in *October*, vol.48 (Spring, 1989), pp.46-68; and Schulte-Sasse's 'Leni Riefenstahl's Feature Films and the Question of a Fascist Aesthetic.'

sake. Through this theology of art, she rejected any social function in her work. This is the reason why Riefenstahl presented herself through the romantic figure of the artist, devoted to capturing beauty and harmony as aesthetic categories, and as a naive woman whose artistic practice was utilised for political ends. Under National Socialism, politics appropriated the rhetoric of late romantic art. Thus, the political task of National Socialism was conceived of as an artistic deed, as can be noted in the words of Goebbels: 'we who shape modern German policy feel ourselves to be artists … the task of art and the artist [being] to form, to give shape, to remove the diseased and create freedom for the healthy.'[66] The following ideas formulated by Riefenstahl (who always claimed that she was at odds with Goebbels) about her work reveal a similar approach to art and life: 'Whatever is purely realistic, slice-of-life, which is average, quotidian, doesn't interest me... I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, by what is living. I seek harmony.'[67] It could be argued that Riefenstahl only pursued beauty in works of art as a spiritual escape from reality. However, I will argue that her work can be defined as the mobilisation of film technology for the purpose of breaking down the boundaries between the aesthetic and real life. Riefenstahl was indeed an outstanding metteur-en-scène who helped Hitler to improve his own image and the false image of harmony in Germany.

Riefenstahl started her career in film as an actress with the director Arnold Fanck in his *Bergfilme* or 'mountain films,' a genre which has often been associated with a pre-Fascist sentiment. Kracauer in the forties and Susan Sontag in the seventies were the most important voices to label these films as 'an anthology of proto-Nazi sentiment.'[68] Kracauer famously stressed the connection between mountain films and

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[66] In Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism,' in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Vintage, 2001), p.92.

[67] Quoted in Schulte-Sasse, Op. Cit., p.131. Originally in Andrew Sarris, ed., *Interviews with Film Directors* (Indianapolis: Bobbs, 1967), p.394.

[68] Kracauer, *Caligari*, pp.257, 258, and Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism,' p.76. The *Bergfilme*, however, have been recently revalued and read in connection with other productions from the Weimar period rather than allied to Nazi propaganda. See, for example, Eric Rentschler, 'Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the Bergfilm,' in *New German Critique*, no. 51, special issue on Weimar Mass Culture (Autumn, 1990), pp137-161. The first film directed by Riefenstahl was in fact highly influenced by the mountain film (*Bergfilm*) genre. *The Blue Light* (Das blaue Licht, 1932), co-written with Béla Balázs, moves between the mythic world of a countryside outcast and the rationality of an urban visitor in a little village in the mountains of South Tyrol. The character played by Riefenstahl, Junta, is a wild and naive woman who lives alone in a cabin and is rejected by the villagers. She is the only person who is able to reach the blue light which merges from the peak of a mountain without dying,

the official National Socialist films in his *Caligari* book. Thus, he labelled Fanck's films pro-Nazi and compared Fanck's *Avalanche* (Stürme über dem Mont Blanc, 1930) with Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*: 'That in the opening sequence of the Nazi documentary *Triumph of the Will*, of 1936 [*sic*], similar cloud masses surround Hitler's airplane on its flight to Nuremberg, reveals the ultimate fusion of the mountain cult and the Hitler cult.'[69] This statement has often been criticised for its teleological view.[70] I would like to argue that the positive aspects of Kracauer's methodology are better expressed in his essay 'The Mass Ornament' than in his introduction to *Caligari*: 'The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself.'[71] One of the most important 'surface level expressions' of the epoch was undoubtedly cinema, as Kracauer put it elsewhere: 'As in no other art, film captures the most fleeting, contingent features of social life.'[72] Thus, in analysing the surface level of an epoch, Kracauer detected the aesthetic expressions of some ideas which were latent in a period of turmoil and which would explode a few years later. Therefore, I would conclude that what this statement reveals—rather than the teleological anticipation of what is to come—is the significance Riefenstahl gives Hitler. He and the mountains demand to be honoured, exalted, ritualised. Like the mountains, Hitler becomes an

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as many young men did when following the light. For that reason she is blamed for the death of these young villagers. The blue light suggests Novalis' blue flower as a romantic sign of the ineffable. The unapproachable in this case is not only the blue light but also Junta, the wild woman who lives in communion with nature. The man who comes from the city, Vigo, falls in love with Junta and goes to live with her. Eventually he discovers how to reach the place where the blue light comes from, a grotto full of gemstones. Vigo provides the villagers with the knowledge of how to find the grotto and exploit the precious stones for their own wealth. Linda Schulte reads this action as a demystification of nature in the service of instrumentality. (Schulte-Sasse, Op. Cit., p.128) However, the exploitation of the mountain brings about the death of Junta, a martyr who reminds us of the impossibility of mastering nature and eventually demystifying it. Thus, Riefenstahl's *The Blue Light* draws inspiration from Fanck's mountain films, stresses the fearful and vengeful aspects of nature and, even though it mentions the possibility of mobilising technology for the sake of the people, builds its discourse around the submission of human beings to natural phenomena.

[69] Kracauer, *Caligari*, pp.257, 258.

[70] See footnote 56 above for a discussion on Kracauer's methodology. Rentschler, for instance, tries to revaluate these films according to the reception they had during the Weimar period and therefore rejects this apparently simplistic connection, since it disregards how it was received at the time. Rentschler, 'Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the Bergfilm.'

[71] 'The Mass Ornament,' p.75.

[72] 'Ideenskizze zu meinem Buch über den Film.' Quoted in the introduction to the 2004 edition of *From Caligari to Hitler*, Leonardo Quaresima, p.xxiii.

image of projection of the inner self, an image of Germanness and power; both glorify submission to inexorable destiny and elemental might.[73] Riefenstahl thus creates a mythical image of National Socialism, as the renaissance of a people led by Hitler. The film excludes history—or rather, it places the rise of the Nazis to power as the superseding of History.[74] By cultivating a 'beautiful semblance' in the film, Riefenstahl displaces the element of play in favour of semblance. As I have already mentioned, Schiller and Benjamin understood the element of play in art as the point at which human beings start to distance themselves from nature. Thus, the images cultivated by Riefenstahl reinforce the elements of cult in art, at the same time as they dismiss the playful elements of film. Hence, by stressing the cultic aspects of the regime, the people are represented in their submission to irrational forces. In *Triumph of the Will*, the depiction of the masses and the individuals within these masses is a corrupted representation; they are performing a ritualistic function, kneeling down to Hitler. Angsar Hillach argues that in the alternation between crowd-scenes and close-ups the individuals could have the 'sensation of being a component part of a collective, a particle of a mass, or an appendage of a leader figure.'[75] The masses can enjoy the aesthetic pleasure of being represented, but the aesthetics of this representation is its own end. Benjamin writes in the third version of the 'Work of Art' essay: 'The violation of the masses, whom fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into serving the production of ritual values.'[76] The film apparatus, in the hands of fascism, is used only to produce and reproduce rituals in the service of a cult of the leader.

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[73] Béla Balázs, who wrote the script for *The Blue Light*, praised Arnold Fanck's *Bergfilme* precisely because the mountains functioned as a projection of the human soul and as redemption of nature's countenance. (See Rentschler, pp.143, 144) In the first chapter, I have compared this element in Balázs with Benjamin's 'optical unconscious.' This reveals that the 'optical unconscious,' a capacity brought about by the technological nature of film, cannot escape problems related to representation.

[74] The introductory titles of *Triumph of the Will* read '*19 Monate nach dem Beginn der Deutschen Wiedergeburt'* (Nineteen months after the beginning of the German rebirth).

[75] Ansgar Hillach, 'The Aesthetics of Politics: Walter Benjamin's "Theories of German Fascism," in *New German Critique*, no. 17, special issue Walter Benjamin (Spring, 1979), p.118.

[76] 'Work of Art' (third version), *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol.4, 1938-1940 (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.269.

Certainly, the events organised by the NSDAP had a ritualistic character in themselves. Simon Taylor has suggested that the construction of the ideological system and presentation of National Socialism sought expression in the mysteries of myth and symbol. In this way, the Nazi regime emulated the mysticism of Christian imagery and ritual consecrations in their own political celebrations. Therefore, National Socialism created a new mysticism (Hitler as the Messiah, the swastika as the deepest historical expression of the German *Volk*, a holy history of the movement) to produce a false mood of national unity and class harmony.[77] This ritualistic character can be clearly seen in *Triumph of the Will*, in the reception of Hitler, in the offerings of the harvest, in the parades of workers, soldiers and the Hitler youth and, finally, in the speeches of the congress. The cultic element of this film is not only in the reproduction of symbols used by Nazism, such as the swastikas or the salutes, but in the presentation of an image without fissures of National Socialism as the rebirth of a people; or, in other words, creating the vision of National Socialism as a total work of art, based on ritual. This construction is made in paradoxical (but conscious) terms. On the one hand, reproducible technology increases its exhibition value and can therefore reach more people (who might experience the same feeling of mass suggestion to which these gigantic parades aspired); on the other hand, there is an exploitation of the cult elements of art to the detriment of those of play. I would like to argue, under the optic of anthropological materialism and the film aesthetics developed by Benjamin, that this use of film favours a contemplative reception at the expense of active engagement.

Esther Leslie argues that Riefenstahl's aesthetics are a negation of industrial modernity by means of the reassertion of an idealist naturalism which 'cultivates a classicism that is contingent on modern technology—yet denies it.'[78] This holds true for all her work, especially for the shots of Nuremberg in *Triumph of the Will* and the cult of the body in *Olympia* (1938). In the former film, we have beautifully composed shots of the old town of Nuremberg. The city appears as diametrically opposed to the alienating American-like city of *Metropolis*, as the idealised epitome of the new Nazi society. The auratisation of this place through the 'beautiful semblance' and harmony that the shots display seeks to build up a spectacle without

[77] Simon Taylor, 'Symbol and Ritual under National Socialism,' in *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32, no. 4 (Dec., 1981), pp.504-520.
[78] Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p.141.

fissures, to appraise the renaissance of a people by means of cultivating the most cultic features of classical art. For Benjamin, as I have already discussed, art is linked to both 'first' and 'second technology.' Thus, 'first technology' is associated with semblance, cult and magic, whereas 'second technology' is connected to play, experimentation and scientism. Technological art is deeply marked by the categories of 'second technology,' but nonetheless is still informed by 'first technology.' Thus, some films—especially Nazi films, as Leslie notes—use 'technology to promote predominantly the characteristics of first *Technik*.'[79] Fascism attributes elements of cult to film, thus understanding 'second technology' as if it were 'first technology.' For that reason, the concepts associated with traditional art are exploited in technologically reproducible art under National Socialism, concealing the technological mediation of the camera.

In a note from 1934, Benjamin made a striking comparison of Chaplin and Hitler. As I will show in the next chapter, every time that Benjamin wanted to highlight the best uses of the film medium, he returned to Chaplin. The most surprising element of this note is that Benjamin compared Hitler's diminished masculinity with Chaplin's effeminate little tramp character six years before Chaplin made *The Great Dictator* (1940).[80] Benjamin also made a comparison between Hitler's followers and the audience of Chaplin's films: whereas Chaplin is a plowshare that cuts through the masses, by means of the laughter which makes the masses loosen up, in the Third Reich the plowshare stamps the ground down firmly and 'no more grass grows there.'[81] Benjamin here contrasts play and license in Chaplin with the seriousness and rigour performed by fascism in the auratisation of its art. Chaplin is, in this way, associated with the characteristics of 'second technology'; whereas fascism is related to the attributes of 'first technology' in art—ritual, beautiful semblance, seriousness—which culminate in sacrificial death. Thus, the depiction of the effects of Hitler on the masses as 'no more grass grows there' is a direct reference to first

[79] Ibid., p.162.
[80] This fact has not gone unnoticed by Benjamin scholars such as Miriam Hansen ('Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street' in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 2, '*Angelus Novus': Perspectives on Walter Benjamin*, Winter, 1999, n332), although the point has never been further developed. The effeminisation of the character of the little tramp reached its peak in the role of a heroine in the maternal melodrama *The Kid* (1920). See Michael Woal and Linda Kowall Woal, 'Chaplin and the Comedy of Melodrama,' in *Journal of Film and Video*, vol.46, no.3 (Autumn, 1994), pp.3-15.
[81] 'Hitler's Diminished Masculinity,' SW2, p.792.

technology's goal of mastering nature. By contrast, Chaplin addresses the masses with laughter. His gags are, thus, an epitome of second technology's basis in repetition and play through which he is able to disrupt the apparent harmony displayed by the myth of National Socialism.[82] For this reason, Benjamin argues that 'Chaplin shows up the comedy of Hitler's gravity.'[83] He foresees that the little tramp and Hitler could perform the same character. As puppets had been banned in Mussolini's Italy and Chaplin films in Nazi Germany, Benjamin argues that both dictators feared being supplanted either by a puppet or by Chaplin. Six years later, *The Great Dictator* performed precisely such a supplantation and the Jewish barber was mistaken for Hitler.[84] In an earlier film, *The Idle Class* (1921), a similar confusion takes place between two social types performed by Chaplin: the little tramp and an alcoholic millionaire. For Chaplin, the little tramp and the bourgeois were in the end the same person. And so, writes Benjamin: 'the vagabond is no less a parasite than the gent.' In this regard, Benjamin says that Chaplin's 'bowler hat, which no longer sits so securely on his head, betrays the fact that the rule of the bourgeoisie is tottering.'[85] Hence, Benjamin suggests that both the bourgeoisie and Hitler are frightened of becoming or being supplanted by a tramp or a Jew. Chaplin's attributes, both his clothes and the accoutrements, point in that direction. His clothes are too large and too old. They could have belonged to someone else or be proof that he, the little tramp, has seen better days. Sabine Hake suggests that 'The difference between the clothes' former splendor and their present shape point to a decline in social and economic status.'[86] In the Germany of unemployment and inflation of the twenties and thirties, much of the audience could identify with that vertiginous social

[82] Nonetheless, Adorno and Horkheimer accused Chaplin of using in *The Great Dictator* the same mystification of nature, viewed in opposition to society, as that carried out by fascism: 'Tears of corn blowing in the wind at the end of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* give the lie to the anti-Fascist plea for freedom. They are like the blond hair of the German girl whose camp life is photographed by the Nazi film company in the summer breeze. Nature is viewed by the mechanism of social domination as a healthy contrast to society, and is therefore denatured.' Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2000), p.149.

[83] 'Hitler's Diminished Masculinity,' SW2, p.792.

[84] In 1937 Chaplin claimed mockingly that Hitler had stolen his moustache. Eisenstein argues that at that time, Chaplin viewed Hitler as a comedian, a grotesque clown. Years passed and Chaplin found out that Hitler was not only a clown, but also a bloodthirsty maniac. Then, says Eisenstein, Chaplin made *The Great Dictator*. Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Charlie Chaplin*, trans. by André Cabaret (Paris: Circé, 2013), pp.71, 72.

[85] 'Hitler's Diminished Masculinity,' SW2, pp.792, 793.

[86] Sabine Hake, 'Chaplin Reception in Weimar Germany,' in *New German Critique*, no. 51, special issue on Weimar Mass Culture (Autumn, 1990), p.106.

decline. Thus, Benjamin recognises that the historical gesture of Chaplin—thanks to which he has also become the greatest comic of his time—is that 'he has incorporated into himself the deepest fears of his contemporaries.'[87]

In the first chapter I explained the shift which took place in the process of writing the 'Work of Art' essay from the concepts of 'first' and 'second nature' to 'first' and 'second technology.' When Benjamin was still using the terms 'first' and 'second nature,' he wrote a working note in which he associated the utopias of 'first nature' with the human body and those of 'second nature' with social and technological problems. In that note, he argued that the fascist slogan of 'blood and soil' blocked the realisation of either of the two utopias. On the one hand, the idea of blood hinders the use of medicine to prevent the body from dying. On the other, the idea of soil runs counter to the utopia of 'second nature.' For Benjamin, the incursions into the Arctic and the stratosphere carried out in the pacified Soviet Union were examples of this utopia. In fascism, the only way to realise a second-nature utopia, writes Benjamin, is when a man ascends to the stratosphere in order to drop bombs. Nazism, therefore, averts the elements of play in art in favour of seriousness, 'beautiful semblance' and cult. This obstruction prevents the utopian elements offered by both art and technology from thriving. In addition, as the concepts that fascism exploits in art and develops through technology are associated with 'first technology,' their goal can only be a form of dominion over nature and the result, a form of self-abuse, can only lead to sacrificial death.

## From the Aestheticisation of Politics to Human Annihilation

Under National Socialism, aestheticising and ritualising the public sphere was one and the same thing. In his article 'Fascist Politics as a Total Work of Art,' Rainer Stollmann argues that the path which takes art from an autonomous sphere to the aestheticisation of politics is in the opposite direction to the communist politicisation of art. With the spread of capitalism throughout the nineteenth century and the principle of value abstraction, Stollmann writes, the social function of art decreased and the concrete nature of art was devalued. In this sense, art and life were becoming

[87] 'Hitler's Diminished Masculinity,' SW2, p.792.

increasingly separate entities. The reconciliation of art and life was problematised, because 'the autonomy principle cannot be dealt with abstractly by demanding art's integration into society.'[88] Thus, this reconciliation had become a question of politics. The politicisation of art demanded by Benjamin in the name of communism meant taking a path from autonomous art to the construction of socialism. Fascism, by contrast, presented a false sublation between art and life. In this way, art under fascism was used to aestheticise and ritualise the public sphere, in order to support and justify its imperialistic policies. National Socialism aimed at forming the world in accordance with the laws of beauty—as can be deduced by the words of Goebbels, quoted above. In this way, the Nazis could establish an aesthetic illusion which was used to masquerade their control and coordination of all aspects of society. Masses could be mobilised for the sake of that beautiful illusion without a purpose and yet, at the same time, be brought together under the *Gleichschaltung*. Thus, German fascism transferred, as Stollmann puts it, 'all energies, wishes, yearnings, psychic drives and phantasies into an aesthetic, socialistic illusion which worked to cover up the real causes of economic and psychic misery; indeed, it could even push for their continuation.'[89] Through the same worship of the fetish of 'beautiful semblance' which was practised in traditional bourgeois art, the false but beautiful semblance of the Third Reich 'became more powerful than any reality and any realistic evaluation of an individual's social situation and political possibilities.'[90] The difference between the 'beautiful semblance' of art and the 'beautiful semblance' propagated by fascism is that whereas the former was used for a private flight from reality, the latter permeated the public sphere and mobilised human beings to the point of their own annihilation.

According to Benjamin, '*All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war*.'[91] In political terms, this can be explained as follows: 'War, and only war, makes it possible to set a goal for mass movements on the grandest scale while preserving traditional property relations.'[92] The purposeless mobilisation

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[88] Rainer Stollmann, 'Fascist Politics as a Total Work of Art: Tendencies of the Aesthetization of Political Life in National Socialism,' trans. by Ronald L. Smith, in *New German Critique*, no. 14 (Spring, 1978), p.50.
[89] Ibid., p.52.
[90] Ibid., p.53.
[91] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.121. Italics in the original.
[92] Ibid.

of the masses follows an aesthetic, ritualistic principle, which hides the economic reason behind such mobilisation. In technological terms, Benjamin formulates the mobilisation of warfare technology similarly: 'only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technological resources while maintaining property relations.'[93] In other words, the only way to mobilise the productive forces, both people and technology, without changing their relation of ownership was through war. This is the true economic and political significance of the fascist glorification of war. According to Jünger, historical materialism does not provide successful explanations for the causes of war, because it only focuses on the economic and not on the cultic nature of wars.[94] Benjamin, by disclosing the mediation of technology in the creation of a cult for the exaltation of wars, demystifies this ritualistic function and understands the real economic reasons behind the cult itself.

In the last thesis of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin criticises Marinetti's praise of war and destruction through his manifesto on the colonial war in Ethiopia. In that text, Marinetti glorifies war and warfare technology as an aesthetic end: the combination of gunfire, barrages, cease-fires and scents into a symphony, the new architecture of armoured tanks and geometric squadrons of aircraft and, more importantly, the metallisation of the human body are all examples of the vocabulary that he uses to praise war. According to Benjamin, Marinetti only expects from war 'the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology.'[95] Benjamin comes to the conclusion that this is the consummation of *l'art pour l'art*. In this conception of art, in which it is its own end, technology is conceived of as 'first technology'—therefore with ritual features—and demands repayment in human

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[93] Ibid.

[94] Jünger, p.129.

[95] 'Work of Art,' p.122. As a futurist, Marinetti reacted against old art. Thus, he perceived more beauty in the speed and violence of modern technology than in traditional bourgeois art. Apart from the new perception brought about by technology and, more especially, warfare technology, Marinetti nevertheless praised old concepts of heroism and nation. He did not want to praise old wars and the Roman Empire ('The boring memory of the Roman grandeur must be cancelled and replaced with an Italian grandeur a hundred times bigger.'), but the technological warfare of twentieth-century wars and the nation which Italy was to become. Marinetti, therefore, welcomed the imperialist reception of technology as a means for destruction and spiritual renewal. In other words, instead of praising the aura of the Victory of Samothrace, he preferred to praise the gas warfare which abolishes the aura. [The quote from Marinetti is from 'The Second Political Manifesto of Futurism' (11 October 1911), written on the eve of the Libyan war. Quoted in Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), p.69.]

material. This aestheticisation of life and politics could only lead to the objectification and, eventually, annihilation of humanity. Benjamin formulates this idea as follows: ‘Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.’[96] It is worth noting that Benjamin talks about a relation of ‘contemplation,’ therefore associated with an old conception of aesthetics. He understands aesthetics as the historical development of human perception, which has been deeply altered by technology, and thus he addresses, as part of his anthropological materialism, the historical impact of technology upon the human body and, more specifically, upon the human sensorium. Fascism finds in war an aesthetic gratification of the technologically-transformed human senses. This aesthetic experience is addressed, however, according to concepts associated with old aesthetics, such as ritual and contemplation.

Benjamin sought to understand dialectically the aesthetics of warfare defended by Marinetti. Thus, imperialism does not develop technology in order to provide human beings with a better life, but for economic growth. As soon as new markets cannot be reached and unemployment starts to grow, the development of technology can only lead to the deployment of both technology and human material in war. In what may appear to be a deterministic argument, Benjamin blames the property system for impeding the *natural* use of productive forces, which is nothing but technology put to humane ends. Thus, Benjamin conceives the transformation of property relations as a first step towards the natural utilisation of productive forces, both workers and technology. Fascism, by contrast, negates the right to transform property relations. Consequently, fascism utilises war as a diversion in order to avoid the material reality of class struggle. By summoning supra-class goals, says Esther Leslie, ‘people can be mobilized not as classes but as masses.’ This is ‘the only way the advance of modern *Technik* can be contained without endangering property relations.’[97] The increasing use of technical sources of energy is directed, therefore, to unnatural ends, i.e. war. Benjamin had already noted this dangerous diversion of energy in the work of Jünger, who claimed that total mobilisation ‘conveys the

[96] ‘Work of Art,’ p.112.
[97] Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, p.135.

extensively branched and densely veined power supply of modern life towards the great current of martial energy.'[98] Benjamin thus returns to the point made in 'To the Planetarium' about the First World War, in which technology, in revenge for the imperialist conception of technology as the mastery of nature by man, betrayed humanity and caused a bloodbath. In the end of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin repeats the idea as follows: '*Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in "human material" for the natural material society has denied it*.'[99] Here, as in the other texts dealing with technology (*One-Way Street*, Surrealism, Eduard Fuchs), Benjamin understands technology as a source of energy. Thus, he argues that in imperialist wars, society deploys the labour force in the form of armies, instead of 'deploying power stations across the land.'[100] Technology, instead of becoming a source of valuable energy for humanity, turns its energy against humans.

In this imperialist conception, technology does not appear as a 'key to happiness.' The destruction caused by war is due to a doomed reception of technology, anticipated in 'To the Planetarium' and 'Theories of German Fascism.' Repeating the same words from the latter essay, Benjamin argues that this fact proved that 'society was not mature enough to make technology its organ, that technology was not sufficiently developed to master the elemental forces of society.'[101] In other words, Benjamin claims that society needs, first, to change property relations and, secondly, to reformulate its conception of technology in order to incorporate technology as a social, collective organ. Earlier in the essay, Benjamin suggested that cinema was the privileged sphere for this collective, technological innervation. However, the failed reception of technology in Germany and its use and abuse under fascism prevented the collective from an innervation which would produce a more salutary relationship among humanity, technology and nature. Eventually, technology, in the hands of fascism, bloodily confronts both humanity and nature. In

[98] Jünger, p.127.
[99] 'Work of Art,' SW3, pp.121, 122. Italics in the original.
[100] Ibid., p.122.
[101] Ibid., p.121.

finding pleasure in the reification of human beings, fascism—through technology and film—reveals ‘the triumph of a nihilistic will.’[102]

[102] These are the words that Kracauer uses to define Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. He continues: ‘it is a frightening spectacle to see many an honest, unsuspecting youngster enthusiastically submit to his corruption, and long columns of exalted men march towards the barren realm of this will as though they themselves wanted to pass away.’ *Caligari*, p.303.

## Chapter 4

## Charlie Chaplin: The Return of the Allegorical Mode in Modernity

Charlie Chaplin is the film figure that appears most often in Benjamin's writings. From his articles on Soviet film in 1927 to the last version of the 'Work of Art' essay in 1939, Benjamin always returned to Chaplin when he wanted to stress the best uses which could be made of the film medium. Consequently, Chaplin is mentioned in every academic text that explores Benjamin's writings on film. Nevertheless, there are very few publications that focus directly on Benjamin's engagement with Chaplin.[1] I want to contribute to this relatively unexplored field of study by presenting Benjamin's writings on Chaplin as a rehabilitation of allegory in the twentieth century, a project that, I will argue, also includes authors such as Franz Kafka and Bertolt Brecht. This chapter follows and develops an argument that Miriam Hansen posed in her posthumously published book *Cinema and Experience*. There, Hansen claimed that Benjamin discerned in both Chaplin and Kafka 'a return of the allegorical mode of modernity.'[2] For her, both men performed the fragmentation and abstraction of the bodies of their characters, making legible their own alienation. The difference between Chaplin and Kafka, says Hansen, is that the

[1] The article that deals most closely with Benjamin's reading of Chaplin is Tom McCall, '"The Dynamite of a Tenth of a Second": Benjamin's Revolutionary Messianism in Silent Film Comedy,' in Gerhard Richter, ed., *Benjamin's Ghosts* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp.74-94. Although this article bears many similarities to my text, such as the consideration of allegorical tropes in Chaplin, the approach to the role of technology in slapstick differs greatly. As a consequence, the interpretation of the famous scene in the conveyor belt in *Modern Times*, analysed both in that article and in the present chapter, leads to totally different conclusions. Another article that should be mentioned is Lawrence Howe, 'Charlie Chaplin in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Reflexive Ambiguity in *Modern Times*,' in *College Literature*, vol.40, no.1 (Winter 2013), pp. 45-65. As the title suggests, this article uses Benjamin's theories to analyse Chaplin (in this case *Modern Times*). However, Howe does not analyse Benjamin's writings on Chaplin. In Spanish, Ana Useros has written the article 'El misterio Chaplin,' a very personal, although also very perceptive reading of Benjamin's engagement with Chaplin. In Juan Barja and César Rendueles, eds., *Mundo Escrito: 13 Derivas desde Walter Benjamin* (Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes, 2013), pp.73-89.

[2] Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (London: University of California Press, 2012), pp.47, 48. The argument is presented in the section of the book devoted to Siegfried Kracauer's Weimar writings.

former ‘combines melancholy with the force of involuntary collective laughter.’[3] She seems to argue that the work of Kafka and Chaplin bears traces of melancholy. However, in contrast to Kafka and Baroque allegory, Chaplin causes people to double up laughing. Hansen also argued that the social and political significance of American slapstick was the ability to represent the perceptual and bodily fragmentation of the human body in modernity through a ‘gestic’ performance. Hansen makes, therefore, a second connection, this time between Chaplin and Brecht, whose concept *Gestus* was originally based on Chaplin’s performance. In this chapter I will develop these links as part of what I consider a rehabilitation of the allegorical procedures that Benjamin had previously analysed in the Baroque mourning dramas and, later, in the work of Baudelaire in the nineteenth century. In this way, I will argue that Benjamin perceived in contemporary cultural figures such as Kafka, Brecht and Chaplin an allegorical intention to express the fragmentation of modern human beings through different media, such as literature, theatre and film. Although Benjamin remained cautious about asserting an allegorical intention in Chaplin, he wrote in a note that: ‘he interprets himself allegorically.’[4] This note provides evidence that Benjamin at least considered the possibility of rehabilitating allegory in Chaplin.

Chaplin was at that time not only admired by the general public—to the point of being one of the most famous celebrities in the world—but also by many artists and intellectuals, especially on the left, such as Siegfried Kracauer, Béla Bálazs, Sergei M. Eisenstein, Jean Cocteau, Elie Faure, Louis Delluc and the surrealists, to name a few.[5] Following the French surrealist writer Philippe Soupault, one of his most

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[3] Ibid., p.48.

[4] *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.1, part 3, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), p.1047. Translated by Hansen, p.130.

[5] Many intellectuals from and around the Surrealist circle in Paris were enthusiasts of Chaplin and wrote important texts about him. For example, the Surrealist group produced a text together called ‘Hands Off Love’ in defence of Chaplin in the public scandal which emerged in the wake of the bill of divorce issued by his second wife Lita Grey and her lawyers. The surrealists supported Chaplin’s vision of love and railed against morality and the institution of marriage, as defended in the 52-page document issued against Chaplin. Many writers based their literary work on this figure and on American slapstick in general, such as Yvan Goll’s film-poem *The Chaplinade* (1920), Luis Buñuel’s article on Buster Keaton’s *College*, the collection of poems by Rafael Alberti *Yo era un tonto y lo que vi me hizo dos tontos* (1929) and the dialogue by Federico García Lorca *Buster Keaton’s Promenade* (1928).

decisive influences on the subject, Benjamin argued that the importance of Chaplin does not reside in his abilities as an actor (no more than in the case of Shakespeare), but rather as an 'author' of his films.[6] The same holds true for Balázs, who claimed that Chaplin the filmmaker was more important than Chaplin the actor. He argued that it is his childlike nature that 'gives him a view of the world that becomes poetic in films.'[7] Similarly, Eisenstein claimed that the genius of Chaplin lay in his child-like gaze, through which he made the smallest event big. He also highlighted his faculty of looking comically at things that frightened others.[8] Both Balázs and Eisenstein argued that behind his comedy there was a melancholy for a lost paradise, which the latter characterised as 'the paradise of childhood.'[9] In short, they recognised, as did Benjamin, that Chaplin projected an allegorical gaze upon things.

In this chapter, I will focus on some anthropological-materialist themes that Benjamin develops with regard to Chaplin. These themes mark the centrality of the body in his film aesthetics and his concerns about the effects of technology on the human body. Through this approach, I will argue that Benjamin perceived in Chaplin's performance an allegorical rendering of the fragmentation of the human body in modernity. Thus, the rehabilitation of allegory in Chaplin focuses, on the one hand, on the dismemberment of the body of the actor through the film structure and, on the other, on the therapeutic, mimetic reception of the audience, which reacts collectively to Chaplin's gags. Benjamin was particularly enthusiastic about the American slapstick genre because it exploited the play elements of film, especially in the interaction of human beings with technology. Benjamin suggested that the salutary consequences of American slapstick came about through the enlargement of the space for play (*Spielraum*) in art, because in the sphere of play everything can be reversed and offered a second chance. According to Hansen, through a regime of play, 'film has the potential to reverse … the catastrophic consequences of an

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6 Soupault argues that Chaplin's greatest film is *A Woman of Paris: A Drama of Fate* (1923), the only film apart from the late *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967) in which Chaplin does not appear as an actor. 'Chaplin in Retrospect,' *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol.2, part 1, 1927-1930 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp.222, 223. In this argument an *Ur*-form of the 'auteur theory', which was developed around the French journal Cahiers du Cinéma in the 1950s, can be identified.

7 Béla Balázs, 'Chaplin, The Ordinary American,' *Early Film Theory:* The Visible Man *and* The Spirit of Film, ed. by Erica Carter, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), p.86.

8 Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Charlie Chaplin*, trans. by André Cabaret (Paris: Circé, 2013), p.14.

9 Balázs, p.85; Eisenstein, p.16.

already failed reception of technology.'[10] For Benjamin, play and reality ideally coincided, as in children's proletarian theatre, in which acted gestures became fused with real ones.[11] He argued—and here there is a profound similarity to Schiller's notion of play—that it was only through play that childhood could be fulfilled. What is relevant here for our purposes is that Benjamin could have seen in Chaplin an attempt to regain childhood and, with it, children's gestures. In children's proletarian theatre, children innervated in their gestures a creativity which was fundamentally grounded in a world of sheer fantasy that was released in performance. For Benjamin, the *secret signal* revealed in these gestures was the most revolutionary act of theatre—a theatre which, he said, 'will unleash in children the most powerful energies of the future.'[12] At the beginning of this text, Benjamin suggests that this theatrical education should be undertaken prior to school instruction, and he places the subject matter of technology in prime position. Therefore, he implies that children's approaches to this subject, once they have been brought up according to the principles of children's proletarian theatre, would be more critical and revolutionary. In 'The Present Situation of Soviet Film' (1927), the first text that Benjamin wrote on film, he praised American slapstick over Russian comedies. Slapstick performed an ironic discourse towards technological matters, contrary to the idealised discourse on technology typical in Soviet Russia. For that very reason, Benjamin regretted that in the Soviet Union the opportunity to see American slapstick was becoming increasingly scarce and criticised the Russian actor Iljinsky for being 'a very imprecise copy of Chaplin.'[13]

The collective laughter heard in cinemas during Chaplin's films was, for Benjamin, a therapeutic, cathartic process in which the tensions of twentieth-century modernity were released. In his notes on the theory of distraction, Benjamin compares the values of distraction in film with the values of catharsis in tragedy.[14] For him, both should be conceived of as physiological phenomena. In the case of cinema, the audience consumes the film as a body and releases the tensions and unconscious energies collectively. Benjamin's theory of distraction thus appears as a necessary

[10] Hansen, p.139.
[11] 'Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre' (1928-1929), SW2, pp.201-206.
[12] Ibid., p.202.
[13] 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film,' SW2, p.12.
[14] 'Theory of Distraction,' *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938 (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.141.

counterpart to the innervation of technology by the audience in the process of film reception. Through collective laughter, Benjamin argues, the audience releases the dangerous energies flourishing in the masses as a consequence of the threats inherent to modern life. In this way, the members of the audience are able to innervate in a more salutary fashion the ‘second technology’ of film into their own body. Chaplin’s films displayed a playful representation of the relation between human beings and technology. For this reason, Benjamin conceived of Chaplin as an author who could counteract through the film medium the alienation of human beings in their everyday interaction with machines.

Benjamin resumed his task of film criticism in February 1929 with the publication of a review of Chaplin’s *The Circus* for *Die literarische Welt*. At that time, his lover Asja Lacis had moved to Berlin, where she was working for the film section of the Soviet trade representation, and they lived together for two months.[15] Through Lacis, Benjamin made the acquaintance of Bertolt Brecht in May 1929.[16] In that period, the three of them engaged in passionate discussions of politics and culture in Brecht’s apartment and the figure of Charlie Chaplin came up often. Brecht had been a fan of Chaplin since first seeing one of his films in 1921. In Chaplin’s performance and acting technique, Brecht saw a model through which social gestures might be de-familiarised. Chaplin therefore became the crucial source for the development of the concept *Gestus*, a term that Brecht started to use around 1931. Benjamin, in turn, adopted this concept to analyse not only Brecht’s epic theatre, but also Chaplin himself. Benjamin also used the term *Gestus* for his analysis of Franz Kafka, the third side of a triangle of authors who, for Benjamin, were to rehabilitate allegory in a technologically saturated and alienating modernity.

## The Rehabilitation of Allegory

Benjamin developed his conception of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), in which he put forward his

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15 Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p.92.

16 Although, according to Erdmut Wizisla, Benjamin and Brecht first met as early as November 1924 (via Lacis). In the next few years, they met occasionally, until they began a serious friendship in 1929. Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Christine Shuttleworth (London: Libris, 2009).

understanding of Baroque German mourning drama as secularised Christian drama. Whereas in the Middle Ages the transience of living creatures was seen as a road to salvation, the Baroque seemed to deny this religious fulfilment and focused instead on a secular solution. Uwe Steiner argues that this 'book can be understood as an attempt to reveal the representative art form of the Baroque as the adequate expression of the era's theological situation.'[17] Bainard Cowan suggests that allegory emerges as the form of expression of that age, because it 'arises from an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent, as passing out of being.'[18] He also argues that, because allegory is pre-eminently a kind of experience, it discloses the truth of the world better through its fragmentary nature than does the Romantic symbol in its pursuit of wholeness. For this reason, Benjamin finds that Baroque dramas are no longer based on myth, as in the case of tragedy, but on earthly matters. Thus, there is no room for the tragic hero in these dramas. This is where Brecht has relevance. Certainly, Brecht's plays are not melancholic and, therefore, could hardly be argued to be allegorical. Nevertheless, Benjamin conceived irony and fragmentation as variants of allegory which may reappear in later periods.[19] In 'What Is Epic Theatre?', Benjamin argued that there is a German connection between Baroque drama and Brecht's plays. However, Benjamin says that this connection has not reached us via a monumental road, but rather a 'mule track, neglected and overgrown.' Hence, the untragic hero comes to light again in Brecht, but only after having passed through 'some obscure smugglers' path.'[20]

Traditionally, allegory could be described as a rhetorical figure that indicates a way of writing or saying one thing yet meaning something different. For Benjamin, nonetheless, allegory is, first of all, a way of looking at things; he also refers to 'the allegorical way of seeing,' 'the allegorical attitude,' 'the allegorical intention' as well as 'allegorical intuition.'[21] In a letter to Scholem dated 19 February 1925, Benjamin described the epistemo-critical introduction to the *Trauerspiel* book as 'a

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[17] Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to his Work and Thought*, trans. by Michael Winkler (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p.69.
[18] Bainard Cowan, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory,' *New German Critique*, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism (Winter, 1981), p.110.
[19] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), p.188. Hereafter referred to as *Trauerspiel*.
[20] 'What Is the Epic Theater? (II),' *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, vol.4, 1938-1940* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.304.
[21] Ibid., p.112.

kind of second stage of my early work on language … dressed up as a theory of ideas.'[22] The *Trauerspiel* book can thus be considered a continuation of his theory of language outlined in texts such as 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (1916) and 'The Task of the Translator' (1921).[23] I would like to argue that in these texts the idea of allegory was *in nuce*. Thus, in the former, Benjamin writes that in the beginning there was the Tree of Life, before the fall of man from paradise after Adam's sin. From then onwards, the Tree of Knowledge governs the world, which is now a world of separation. Before the fall, there was no division between name and thing, and hence there was no need for an external knowledge to bridge the gap between being and thinking. Benjamin bestows upon man the task of completing the process of creation. Human beings accomplish this task by translating the imperfect, mute language of nature into the language of names, since they have been invested with the gift of language. 'By bestowing names upon things,' argues Richard Wolin, 'man elevates them, grants them dignity, redeems them from a fate of speechless anonymity.'[24] The task of the allegorist is, through a subjective procedure, to restore the state in which things will be called by their proper names. The apprehension of the original state of things responds to the idea that 'the origin is the goal.' According to Wolin this conception should be understood as the 'fulfilment of a potentiality which lies dormant in origin, the attainment of which simultaneously represents a quantum leap beyond the original point of departure.'[25] For Benjamin, the concept 'origin' (*Ursprung*[26]) 'is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance.' Thus, he argues that 'that which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual,'

[22] Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin (1910-1940)*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.261.
[23] Similarities can be found in his subsequent, though immanent, conception of history, especially in the theses 'On the Concept of History.' See the comparison between allegory and the 'dialectical image' below.
[24] Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), p.42.
[25] Ibid., pp.38, 39.
[26] Samuel Weber points out that one of the meanings of *Sprung* is 'crack.' From this linguistic observation, he argues that 'The Ur-Sprung is the irremediable split or crack that marks the movement of restoration and reinstatement by which singular beings seek to totalize themselves in their extremity.' Samuel Weber, 'Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's Origin of the German Mourning Play,' in *MLN*, vol.106, no.3, German Issue (April, 1991), pp.472, 473.

but needs to be recognised, both as a process of restoration and reestablishment, and as something imperfect and incomplete.[27] Allegory is precisely the technique that articulates this movement and makes it visible. In sum, allegory does not try to return to a golden past that can be 'recaptured *in toto*,' but to redeem those elements from the past under threat of being forgotten.

Cowan suggests that, although the 'existence-in-absence of truth' has been explained in origin-myths of fall and rupture, it can only be understood by analysing representation. According to him, 'allegory shows a conviction that the truth resides elsewhere.'[28] Thus, allegory responds to the human condition of being exiled from truth. As signification, allegory recognises both the existence of truth and its absence, its inaccessibility. Truth cannot be found in the sign, but elsewhere. Allegory illuminates precisely this gap between sign and signified. For this reason, in allegory there is always an interpretative context not given to the reader, who has to grasp and complete it.[29] Thus, the truth is not as much in the content as in the form: in the process of representing. Allegory, therefore, does not aim at a self-enclosed organicity as does the symbol, but links the fragment to the total, leaving such fragments visible. In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin states with regard to the form of allegory that:

> The writer must not conceal the fact that his activity is one of arranging, since it was not so much the mere whole as its obviously constructed quality that was the principal impression which was aimed at. Hence the display of the craftsmanship, which, in Calderón especially, shows through like the masonry in a building whose rendering has broken away.[30]

Allegory is, therefore, both fragmentary and visible. In fact, Benjamin always highlighted the fragmentary nature of those forms in which he detected a redemptive function. Thus, in 'The Task of the Translator,' Benjamin compares translation with the fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together. For him, both the original and

[27] *Trauerspiel*, pp.45, 46.
[28] Cowan, p.113.
[29] Lloyd Spencer recognises that 'Benjamin's all-too-automatic movement from allegory as a literary figure, or mode to the allegorical "way of seeing," or outlook it expresses, is itself a source of difficulty in Benjamin's writings.' Lloyd Spencer, 'Allegory in the World of the Commodity: The Importance of Central Park,' in *New German Critique*, no.34 (Winter, 1985), p.62.
[30] *Trauerspiel*, p.179.

the translation must be 'recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.'[31] Leslie compares this idea of the fragments of a broken vessel which must be brought together with both montage and the restorative practice of the angel of history. If, according to the cabbalistic concept of tikkun, God's vessel was broken and divine sparks in fragments were scattered throughout the material world, the world is to be put back together in 'a montage praxis, using debris and rubbish, the broken pots and torn scraps, not the high, sublime reordering of harmony in a bloodless, hands-off aestheticism.'[32] This idea is also similar to the image of the cinematographic apparatus, which enters reality as a surgical tool that Benjamin uses in the 'Work of Art' essay to illustrate the assembling nature of film. Thus, whereas the painter—like the magician—maintained a natural distance from reality, the cinematographer penetrated deeply into its tissue. If the former created a total image, the cinematographer's image was piecemeal, 'its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law.'[33] Leslie has noticed that in this simile of the cinematographer as a surgeon there is an idea of dissecting the total, which offers 'a new way of representing actuality in its multiple potential modalities.' In this way, Leslie suggests that Benjamin considered montage to be an avant-garde procedure able 'to eliminate the organic totalities of art categories.'[34] Hence, through the fragmentariness of disparate art forms, Benjamin tried to conceive allegorical procedures—or allegorical ways of looking at things—in such different authors and formats as the Baroque dramatists, Baudelaire and even, as I shall show, Brecht, Kafka and Chaplin.

Benjamin drafted some comparisons between Kafka and Chaplin in the notes which led to his great essay on Kafka from 1934, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death.' The most important one for the present discussion reads as follows:

> Chaplin holds in his hands a genuine key to the interpretation of Kafka. Just as occurs in Chaplin's situations, in which in a quite unparalleled way rejected and disinherited existence, eternal human agony combines with the

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[31] 'The Task of the Translator,' *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol.1, 1913-1926 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.260.
[32] Leslie, 'Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft,' in *Journal of Design History*, vol.11, no.1, Craft, Modernism and Modernity (1998), p.12.
[33] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.116.
[34] Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto, 2000), p.141.

> particular circumstances of contemporary being, the monetary system, the city, the police, etc., so too in Kafka every event is Janus-faced, completely immemorial, without history and yet, at the same time, possessing the latest, journalistic topicality.[35]

This commentary suggests that the connection between the allegorical mode in Kafka and Chaplin materialises in the way that they blend ahistorical, human conditions and contingent situations. To understand this 'allegorical mode' I will try to argue, first, that the 'journalistic topicality' that Benjamin detects in both figures is linked to the allegorical intention that he recognises in the Baroque *Trauerspiel*. Benjamin's theory of allegory is opposed to both tragedy and symbol because, instead of being rooted in myth, it is rooted in history. Hence, both content and style are generated from history and the socio-political texture in which the dramas take place. Adorno puts it plainly when he writes that 'The theme of the allegorical is, simply, history.'[36] For him, the relationship between sign and signification in allegory is a historical relationship, an expression of the historical context from which it arises. The conservative critic Georges Steiner has argued that the baroque dramatist and the allegorist 'cling fervently to the world,' because the *Trauerspiel* is mundane, earth-bound and corporeal, and, rather than being transcendental, 'celebrates the immanence of existence.'[37] Secondly, I will try to explain why the completely immemorial, ahistorical conditions of human existence which Kafka and Chaplin brought about in their work represent the other side of allegory. Thus, Benjamin clarifies that allegory is not only concerned with the appreciation of the transience of things, but also with rescuing them for eternity.[38] As I indicated above, allegory is in this way able to rescue the forgotten, hidden, unsuccessful and sorrowful elements of history to create and develop new and multiple meanings which may eventually influence the present. In the *Arcades Project* and the theses 'On the Concept of History,' Benjamin substitutes the 'dialectical image' for allegory. In these texts, the dialectical image brings the present into conflict with its

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[35] *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.2, part 3, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 1198. Translated by Esther Leslie in *Walter Benjamin*, pp.119, 120.

[36] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History,' in *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought*, no. 60 (Summer, 1984), p.119.

[37] George Steiner, 'Introduction' to *Trauerspiel*, p.16.

[38] *Trauerspiel*, p.223.

origin, with a primeval age: ‘In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, “what has been from time immemorial.”’[39] The allegorical mode which both Kafka and Chaplin revive in their own styles is the possibility of creating that leap from a sort of eternal knowledge which lies dormant in a time immemorial to the very actuality of the modern, chaotic and fragmentary world.

Benjamin also presents this function of allegory in his discussion of Kafka’s parables. In a diary entry of 1934, recorded in Brecht’s residence in Denmark, Benjamin writes a note on Kafka in which he pairs up parable and allegory: ‘His starting point is really the parable, the allegory, which is answerable to reason and hence cannot be entirely in earnest on the literal plane.’[40] In this line of argument, Benjamin claims in his 1934 essay on Kafka that his stories are set in a swamp world (*Sumpfwelt*), at a stage which is now forgotten, but this does not mean that it does not extend to the present. ‘On the contrary,’ says Benjamin, ‘it is present by virtue of this very oblivion.’[41] According to Benjamin, the experience transmitted in these stories is deeper than the average person’s, because Kafka did not consider his age to be an advance on previous times, but one that overlapped with earlier ages. The power of his parables is to bring ancient wisdom to the present and make, in this way, allegorical commentaries on the contemporary situation of man. In the essay on Kafka, Benjamin analyses the allegorical function of his parables and argues that they unfold as a bud unfolds into a blossom—and not as a folded paper unfolds into a flat sheet. For this reason, Kafka’s parables do not have a single and clear meaning, they do not clarify, but rather open up to a richness of significance, which relate them to religious-like teachings. Tim Beasley-Murray has analysed this concept of ‘unfolding’ in Benjamin in relation to other seminal motifs in his oeuvre. For him, the difference between these two ways of unfolding is similar to the different approaches towards the past of historicism and historical materialism. Hence, whereas the historicist provides a unique, eternal image of the past (like the paper that unfolds into a flat sheet), historical materialism, by confronting the past as a

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[39] *Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), convolute [N4, 1], p.464.

[40] ‘Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934,’ *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings,* vol.2, part 2, 1931-1924 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.784.

[41] ‘Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,’ SW2, p.809.

monad, recognises a seed inside historical time with germinative power which can be nourished, empowered and brought into the present. Thus, historical materialism does not overlook historical phenomena as the former approach does.[42]

Beasley-Murray understands in this way that blasting a specific era or object out of the homogenous course of history, as Benjamin proposes in the theses 'On the Concept of History,' is a variant of unfolding 'that allows time itself to come to fruit as the historically understood.'[43] In this way, the past is seen as a seed pregnant with germinating powers, unfolding into the present and the future. According to Beasley-Murray, film might be thought of in the same terms. To be sure, Benjamin did not use the same word as in the previously mentioned examples, that is, *entfalten*, but rather *abrollen*, better translated as 'rolling out.'[44] Thus, *abrollen* would not have the same connotations of unfolding in the sense of gaining in complexity, although, according to Beasley-Murray, thanks to the 'optical unconscious'—and following the passage about exploding the prison-world of our city streets—'the artificial landscape of modernity unfolds into new and unforeseeable blossoms.'[45] The outcome of such a blossoming is not nature, but 'second nature,' 'the Blue Flower in the land of technology.'[46] Following Beasley-Murray's argument, it could be argued that the allegorical unfoldings of Kafka, and by the same token of Chaplin, are able to bring seeds from the past, in the form of wisdom, gestures, etc., to confront the present.[47] In film, this collision allows the audience, in the mimetic innervation of

[42] Tim Beasley-Murray, 'On Some Seminal Motifs in Walter Benjamin: Seed, Sperm, Modernity, and Gender,' in *Modernism/modernity*, vol.19, no.4 (November, 2012), p.780.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Tim Beasley-Murray refers to the following fragment from the 'Work of Art' essay: 'Let us compare the screen [*Leinwand*] on which a film unfolds with the canvas [*Leinwand*] of a painting. The image on the film screen changes, whereas the image on the canvas does not.' 'Work of Art,' SW3, n132. Nonetheless, Benjamin uses the term unfolding with regard to film in other texts: 'Film: unfolding [result? – *Auswicklung* or *Aswirkung*] of all the forms of perception, the tempos and rhythms, which lie preformed in today's machines, such that all problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in the context of film.' AP, convolute [K3, 3], p.394; 'Couldn't an exciting film be made from the map of Paris? From the unfolding of its various aspects in temporal succession? From the compression of a centuries-long movement of streets, boulevards, arcades, and squares into the space of half an hour? And does the flâneur do anything different?' AP, convolute [C 1, 9], p.83.
[45] Beasley-Murray, p.784.
[46] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.115.
[47] Compare the way that Beasley-Murray's argument can be applied to the allegorical intuition of Chaplin with the following remarks by Béla Balázs on Chaplin: 'He never operates with a finished, fully worked-out story that can then be filled with the detailed realities of life (as the ready-made form is filled with molten bronze). He does not begin

film technology, to incorporate this blossoming seed to the 'first nature' of the collective techno-body which must be organised by the proletariat.

### Staging Self-Alienation (*Gestus* in Brecht and Kafka)

As I briefly mention above, the concept *Gestus* served similar purposes to allegory—at least, according to Benjamin's reading of the term. This concept, which Benjamin used to analyse not only Brecht's theatre but also Kafka and Chaplin, was also based on discontinuity and fragmentation. *Gestus* is a word that Brecht coined from the German word for gesture (*Geste*). Throughout his career he considered the concept in different ways. The first time that Brecht used the term was in a 1920 theatre review, in which *Gestus* was employed to signify bodily gesture as opposed to spoken word.[48] It was not until 1929 that he began to use the concept as a pillar of his theory of the epic theatre. Brecht's assistant director Carl Weber defined it 'as the total process, the "ensemble" of all physical behavior the actor displays when showing as a "character" on stage by way of his/her social interactions.'[49] In a text written in the mid-thirties on 'gestic music,' Brecht wrote that *Gestus* 'is not supposed to mean gesticulation: it is not a matter of explanatory or emphatic movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes.'[50] Hence, a language is gestic, says Brecht, when that language is grounded in a gesture and conveys the attitude that the speaker adopts towards other people. Chaplin was one of the most influential sources for the development of the concept *Gestus*. Brecht had been a great fan of Chaplin since his films were first imported to Germany in 1921. In a diary entry from 29th October 1921, Brecht enthusiastically talks about the short *The Face on the Barroom Floor* (1914). He describes the film as 'the most profoundly moving thing I've ever

with an idea, with a form, but with the living material of individual realities. He creates his films inductively, not deductively. He does not shape his material but lets it grow and unfold, like a living plant. He feeds it with the blood of his blood, trains it and refines it until ever deeper meanings are revealed. He is no sculptor of dead matter but an expert gardener who cultivates a living life.' Balázs, p.86. It can be argued that with this way of working, the germinating seeds from the past which are hidden in the present can unfold and collide with the very actualities and topicalities represented by the film.

[48] Carl Weber, 'Brecht's Concept of *Gestus* and the American Performance Tradition,' in Carol Martin and Henry Bial, eds., *Brecht Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.43.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Bertolt Brecht, 'On Gestic Music,' in *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. by John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978), p.104.

seen in the cinema: utterly simple.' Then, he states the qualities he perceives in Chaplin's performance: 'Chaplin's face is always impassive, as though waxed over, a single expressive twitch rips it apart, very simple, strong, worried.'[51] According to Weber, this early text on Chaplin is a perfect formulation of Brecht's later postulate that 'the actor's face should be an empty face written on by the body's *Gestus*.'[52] Brecht's indebtedness to Chaplin for this concept is still more obvious in a note that he wrote in 1931 on the production of *Man Is Man*, in which Brecht wrote: 'The actor of the epic theatre needs an artistic economy totally different from that of the dramatic actor. In a way, Chaplin would serve the demands of the actor of the epic theatre better than those of the dramatic theatre.'[53] Hence, Brecht found in Chaplin an acting technique that he could apply to the epic theatre in order to convey social commentaries.

Benjamin analysed the concept *Gestus* in depth in his texts on Brecht's epic theatre. He defined *Gestus* as 'dialectics at a standstill.' For him, this technique frames and encloses an attitude and, hence, interrupts the flow of real life in a way that raises astonishment (*Staunen*) in the audience. 'This astonishment,' says Benjamin 'is the means whereby epic theatre, in a hard, pure way, revives a Socratic praxis,' in opposition to Aristotelian psychological absorption.[54] Through this astonishment, spectators are able to spot the contradictions of such a situation. In 'The Author as Producer' Benjamin defines epic theatre's aim as portraying situations rather than plots. The plays create the situations, says Benjamin, by interrupting the action, for example, through songs. In 'What Is Epic Theatre?', Benjamin argues that the truly important aspect of epic theatre is that the audience discover the situation for the first time or that a common situation is de-familiarised and looked at from a new, more critical perspective. This de-familiarisation (*Verfremdung*) is achieved by interrupting the action. Benjamin claims that the principle of interruption of the epic theatre takes up the procedure that had become familiar in recent years in media such as film and radio, but also in literature and photography, that is, montage. Benjamin

[51] *Bertolt Brecht diaries 1920-1922*, ed. by Herta Ramthun, trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1987), pp.140, 141.
[52] Carl Weber, p.44.
[53] Ibid., p.45. Originally in *Bertolt Brecht: Gesammelte Werke*, vol.17 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), p.987.
[54] 'What Is Epic Theatre?' (first version), in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), p.4.

suggests here that montage in film has influenced other arts, such as literature, photography and, in this case, also theatre. To put it differently, interruption is a procedure which the film medium expresses naturally through montage and which theatre can borrow and exploit. Benjamin puts it plainly when he says that 'Brecht's discovery and use of the *gestus* is nothing but the restoration of the method of montage decisive in radio and film, from an often merely modish procedure to a human event.'[55] The similarities of the interruption principle in the epic theatre and the dialectical structure of film, in which discontinuous images replace one another in a continuous sequence, are enhanced by Benjamin in the following remark from the article 'What Is Epic Theatre?':

> Like the images of a film, the epic theater moves in spurts. Its basic form is that of the shock with which the individual, well-defined situations of a play collide. The songs, the captions, the gestic conventions set off one situation from another. This creates intervals which, if anything, undermine the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy. These intervals are provided so that the audience can respond critically to the player's actions and the way they are presented.[56]

The principle of epic theatre is, as in radio and film, based on interruptions. The only difference, says Benjamin, is that in the epic theatre the interruption has a pedagogic function, whereas in film it has primarily the character of a stimulus. Epic theatre's interruption thus 'brings the action to a halt, and hence compels the listener to take up an attitude toward the events on the stage and forces the actor to adopt a critical view of his role.'[57] By interrupting the action, the spectator is prevented from experiencing psychological absorption into the plot and can reflect on the situation performed. That distance is worked out through the *Verfremdungseffekt* (de-familiarising or estrangement effect), by which the alienation of the characters is reinforced and, thus, eventually uncovered and revealed. The actors of the epic theatre play their roles to make the social gestures of such characters implicit. The method used by the epic theatre whereby the spectator does not sympathise with the protagonist is to astonish the audience with every gesture, with every situation.

[55] 'The Author as Producer,' SW2, p.778.
[56] 'What Is Epic Theater?' (second version), SW4, p.306.
[57] 'Theater and Radio,' SW2, p.585.

Benjamin defines this non-Aristotelian dramatic method as follows: 'instead of identifying with the protagonist, the audience should learn to feel astonished at the circumstances under which he functions.'[58] I will show that he perceived a similar method in Kafka.

In a conversation with Benjamin, Brecht said that Kafka always repeats the same theme: the astonishment of a man who foresees a new order in the near future and cannot find his place within it. The characters of Kafka are astonished and tinged with horror and therefore cannot describe any event without distortions. 'In other words,' says Benjamin of Kafka, 'everything he describes makes statements about something other than itself,' revealing thus the allegorical intuition of Kafka.[59] In the 1934 essay, he claims that 'Kafka's entire work constitutes a code of gestures.'[60] Benjamin traces the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, from the novel *Amerika*, back to Chinese theatre (studied by Brecht to develop his epic theatre), which is a theatre which dissolves the events into gestural components. In that theatre, the applicants—among them the novel's main character, Karl Rossmann—are only expected to be able to play themselves. This theatre is, then, testing the conditions of a typical man in society, in the same way as would happen in Brecht's epic theatre. For that reason, Benjamin says that Kafka's world is a world theatre and man is always on stage. The gestures performed by Kafka's characters in the end uncover the situations in which they are trapped. Benjamin argues that these gestures initially have no definite symbolic meaning for Kafka, but rather that he 'tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts.'[61] He concludes that Kafka can only understand things in the form of a *Gestus* and this gesture, which he does not understand, 'constitutes the cloudy part of the parables.'[62]

The use of animals as the characters of his stories is part of the same procedure:

> This animal gesture combines the utmost mysteriousness with the utmost simplicity. You can read Kafka's animal stories for quite a while without realizing that they are not about human beings at all. When you finally come

[58] 'What Is Epic Theater?' (second version), SW4, p.304.
[59] 'May-June 1931,' SW2, pp.477, 478.
[60] 'Kafka,' SW2, p.801.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., p.808.

> upon the name of the creature—monkey, dog, mole—you look up in fright and realize that you are already far away from the continent of man. But it is always Kafka; he divests human gesture of its traditional supports, and then has a subject for reflection without end.[63]

Kafka raises astonishment in his readers by dissociating purely human gestures from the human world. In so doing, he creates a critical distance from social human behaviour, embodied in these creatures. As Benjamin writes in a diary entry from 1931, this astonishment may be either born of fear, or cause fear in others. Such fear is prefigured in the 'law of a new order in which all the things in which it expresses itself are misshapen, a law that deforms all things and all the people it touches.'[64]

In the 1934 essay, Benjamin compares Kafka's characters and creatures to Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik,* whose main character is astonished by everything. Finally, Benjamin compares the alienation of these figures with film technology:

> The invention of motion pictures and the phonograph came in an age of maximum alienation of men from one another, of unpredictably intervening relationships which have become their only ones. Experiments have proved that a man does not recognize his own gait on film or his own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what leads him to study, where he may encounter fragments of his own existence—fragments that are still within the context of the role. He might catch hold of the lost *gestus* the way Peter Schlemihl caught hold of the shadow he had sold. He might understand himself, but what an enormous effort would be required![65]

Kafka's characters are, then, similar to those people who cannot recognise those gestures as their own, but who nevertheless encounter fragments of their own existence and, therefore, can discern their process of alienation. Benjamin compares the perception of fragments of one's own social gesture through cinema and through Kafka's characters with the way Peter Schlemil tries to recover the shadow he has

[63] Ibid., p.802.
[64] 'May-June 1931,' p.479.
[65] 'Kafka,' SW2, p.814.

sold. Schlemihl is a character from an early nineteenth-century story who sells his shadow to gain social recognition, but nonetheless eventually becomes an outcast.[66] In this fragment, Benjamin is also consciously comparing Kafka's situations with the representation of human beings by means of the cinematographic apparatus, which according to him may enable '*a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation*.'[67] Thus, the self-alienation produced in Kafka's stories or that felt through the use of a phonograph or film can be reversed and used as a materialist exposition of the alienation of people in their everyday life.

In the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin outlines the differences between film and stage actors as follows. The performance of the film actor is made in front of a group of specialists (director, producer, technicians, etc.), instead of the audience. This intervention of the specialist in the performance of the actor is, according to Benjamin, what determines the process of film production. The action performed by the film actor can be recorded in different takes and from different angles, but it is the eventual decision at the editing table (taken by the editor, the director, etc.) which will establish the final performance. Benjamin compares this aspect of filmmaking to a test. The specialists who are in front of the actor recording his performance are in the position of the testers. In the cinema, however, this role is given to the masses. In addition, the film actor feels estrangement in the face of the apparatus in the same way that a person feels in front of his/her image in the mirror, gait in a film or voice in a phonograph, as Benjamin put it in the fragment above. The difference, he argues, is that this mirror is detachable and transportable to a place in front of the masses. The masses control and test the actor. In this process, they can also feel themselves recognised in the actor via a positive sense of estrangement. For Benjamin, the workers fill the cinema theatres in the evening to witness the film actor in front of an apparatus, as they have done in their workdays.

[66] Benjamin had alluded to the figure of Schlemihl before, in a fragmentary article entitled 'Ibizan Sequence' that he wrote between April and May 1932 for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In a section called 'The Compass of Success,' Benjamin compares Chaplin with Schlemihl. Benjamin places both Chaplin and Schlemihl in a division regarding the position of different figures in relation to success. Chaplin is at the level of '*Lack of success* at the cost of abandoning every conviction,' or, to put it differently, as a genius of failure. Chaplin is here depicted by Benjamin as a social outcast, as someone who fails to fit in society, but who also refuses to take part in the competition for success. Benjamin is here referring to Chaplin-the-character ('the tramp' or 'the little fellow'), rather than Chaplin-the-star. 'Ibizan Sequence,' SW2, p.590.

[67] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.113. Italics in the original.

If the masses have relinquished their humanity in front of the machines in their workplaces, they can now be on the other side, testing the actor and not being tested. But the actor—and probably Chaplin was the most exemplary case in this regard—is not only asserting his humanity against the apparatus, as the workers-turned-into-audience do, but also placing the apparatus at the service of the proletarian masses.[68] The experience of these masses, which here are understood in a similar way to Brecht's proletarian audience, can thus recover an experience which is now mediated but which, for that very same reason, is easier to adapt to the collective body (*Kollektivleib*) formed by the audience. The sense of estrangement which is produced in the gap between the film actor and the spectator is what Benjamin calls the positive use of self-alienation.

In the article 'Test and Gestus in Brecht and Benjamin,' Brigit Doherty analyses the use of this term in both authors. She argues that in the Weimar Republic there were many psychotechnical tests to assess the vocational aptitude of workers, jobseekers or, more specifically, soldiers who returned home after World War I and went back to work. These psychotechnical aptitude tests were extensively employed in Germany during and after the First World War, in vocational counselling agencies and psychotechnical laboratories, as well as in factories and private companies. For Benjamin, these vocational tests were designed to assess the *Haltung* (attitude, stance, disposition) of the workers rather than the content of the work. In this way, the tests focused on the gestures, aptitudes and capabilities of the workers. By reversing the aim of the tests, both Benjamin and Brecht conceived of them as representations of human types, as the dissection of persons into bodily gestures. In this way, a job could be allocated to them according to their aptitudes, even if this job did not exist. In short, these psychotechnical tests were a good means of dissecting human behaviour and social relations through gesture and attitude, as the method of epic theatre aimed to do. In his diary entries from the summer of 1934, Benjamin mentions an anecdote that Brecht told him about the actress Carola Neher, which explains this conception perfectly. Brecht wanted to teach Neher how to wash her face. According to Brecht, Neher washed her face with the intention of not being dirty. However, in order to render the *Gestus* of the action itself, she had to focus

[68] Ibid., p.111.

instead on the bodily gestures and posture of the action and not on the goal.[69] Brecht wanted to film the skills that Neher had acquired at washing her face, although eventually he never did so. In fact, Doherty mentions that modern technologies such as film were employed in these psychotechnical tests to assess the *Haltung* of soldiers and workers.[70] Therefore, Brecht and Benjamin used the term 'test' by inverting the roles: the audience, many of whom had probably been subjects of these tests, was the tester while the actor performed the role of the tested. This was part of the transformation or refunctioning (*Umfunktionierung)* of the medium which both Brecht and Benjamin championed. The actors could thus dissect the persona of their characters through bodily and mental gestures. Through these gestures, they would be able to quote the attitudes of the social types they were performing. Furthermore, the audience could easily recognise those social gestures with the appraisal of an expert. In the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma in Kafka's novel *Amerika*, Benjamin observed a similar function. In their performance, the applicants to the theatre, by playing themselves, dissolved their own behaviour into gestures, thereby revealing the social attitudes of the characters, in a very similar manner to Brecht's epic theatre.

### Chaplin's *Gestus*

The difference between Chaplin and these two figures, Brecht and Kafka, is that Chaplin's performance can only take place in film—not with techniques borrowed from film, as in Brecht. In a note written in relation to the composition of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin wrote:

> The formula in which the dialectical structure of film—film considered in its technological dimension—finds expression runs as follows. Discontinuous images replace one another in a continuous sequence. A theory of film would need to take account of both these facts. First of all, with regard to continuity, it cannot be overlooked that the assembly line, which plays such a fundamental role in the process of production, is in a sense represented by the filmstrip in the process of consumption. Both came into being at roughly the

[69] 'Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934,' SW2, pp.783, 784. Here, the preponderance of process over content indicates a crucial similarity to the procedure of allegory.

[70] Brigit Doherty, 'Test and Gestus in Brecht and Benjamin,' in *MLN*, vol.115, no.3, German Issue (April, 2000), p.473.

> same time. The social significance of the one cannot be fully understood without that of the other.[71]

The structure by which the discontinuous images of cinema (frame, shot, sequence) are replaced in its reception by a continuous sequence is, for Benjamin, the same structure which is experienced by factory workers in the assembly line in the process of production. The social significance which Benjamin implies here is a therapeutic, but also educative, mimetic adaptation to the new rhythms and apperceptions of modernity. It was through this fragmentary structure that Chaplin could dissect his gestures in a similar way to the Brechtian *Gestus*.

In the following note, Benjamin compares the stage actor and the film actor. Chaplin, who for Benjamin was inherently a film actor, is able to render the fragmentation of his contemporaries by means of integrating his body and mental posture into the film image:

> Chaplin's way of moving [*Gestus*] is not really that of an actor. He could not have made an impact on the stage. His unique significance lies in the fact that, in his work, the human being is integrated into the film image by way of his gestures—that is, his bodily and mental posture. The innovation of Chaplin's gestures is that he dissects the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations. Each single movement he makes is composed of a succession of staccato bits of movement. Whether it is his walk, the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat—always the same jerky sequence of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial functions.[72]

Benjamin thus analyses the fragmentation of Chaplin's persona according to the cinematic laws of discontinuity. The importance of Chaplin's performance is that he is able to dissect the expressive movements of human beings (in an age in which discontinuity of experience has become the norm) in 'a succession of staccato bits of movements' which are integrated into the film image. Human functions are thus fragmented and incorporated into the film image which is, in turn, a discontinuous succession of images. Miriam Hansen defines the social output of this fragmentation

[71] 'The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression,' SW3, p.94.
[72] Ibid.

by saying that Chaplin performs ‘a “gestic” rendering of the experience of perceptual and bodily fragmentation.’[73] By mimicking the structure of film through the human motorial functions characteristic of modern urban life, Chaplin is integrated into the film image. Thus, his allegorical and gestural rendering is always mediated by film technology and, therefore, performs the experience of his contemporaries in relation to technology through the very same technology of reproduction which is responsible for such an experience. Hansen argues that film can fulfil a cognitive task in the period of the industrial transformation of human perception. For her, ‘Chaplin’s exercises in fragmentation are a case in point: by chopping up expressive body movement into a sequence of minute mechanical impulses, he renders the law of the apparatus visible as the law of human movement.’[74] Thus, she argues that the representation of human beings’ self-alienation was allegorical insofar as such cinematic representation could make the condition of alienation visible, readable or even quotable in materialist terms.[75] This is precisely what Benjamin was referring to when he suggested that Chaplin’s performance was allegorical. Thus, Benjamin wrote in a note: ‘Dismemberment of Chaplin; he interprets himself allegorically.’[76] Benjamin found Chaplin’s dismemberment of his own body and mental posture to be characteristic of his interpretation of an allegorical representation of the modern experience of human beings.[77]

In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin had already prefigured a surgical function in allegory, similar to the dismemberment of Chaplin mentioned above. He not only characterised allegory as an expressive procedure able to fragment reality and unfold new meanings through the very cracks of that fragmentation, he also implied that allegory could be used to represent the body which, consequently, should be

[73] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, pp.47, 48.
[74] Hansen, ‘Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: “The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology”’ in *New German Critique*, no. 40, special issue on Weimar Film Theory (Winter, 1987), p.203.
[75] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p.178.
[76] *GS*, vol.1, part 3, p.1047. Trans. by Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p.130.
[77] Benjamin went on to quote Philippe Soupault: ‘La canne exprimaient toute la lourdeur des soucis d’ici-bas’ (‘The cane reveals the fatigue of the lower classes’—*my translation*). Therefore, it is not only the fragmented body of Chaplin which is allegorical, but also his accoutrements, such as the cane, the hat and the moustache. In the note he wrote about *The Circus*, Benjamin mentioned that Chaplin’s clothes do not suit him and that he has not taken them off for a month (‘Chaplin,’ SW2, p.199). Thus, his attire might point to social decline, to the proletarianisation of society. For Benjamin, therefore, these accoutrements carry the meaning of the anxiety and experience of the proletariat.

fragmented, that is, cut into pieces. Benjamin quotes the French heraldist Claude-François Ménestrier in a controversy about the norms of the emblematic: 'The whole human body cannot enter a symbolical icon, but it is not inappropriate for parts of the body to constitute it.' Following this commentary, Benjamin states that:

> the human body could be no exception to the commandment which ordered the destruction of the organic so that the true meaning, as it was written and ordained, might be picked up from its fragments. Where, indeed, could this law be more triumphantly displayed than in the man who abandons his conventional, conscious physis in order to scatter it to the manifold regions of meaning?[78]

For Benjamin, the allegorisation of the body can be carried through in all its vigour only in the corpse, where limbs can be dismembered and the body falls away piece by piece. The dismemberment of Chaplin could be thus enacted in a medium in which Chaplin's body was integrated into the discontinuous and fragmentary structure of film.

Benjamin wanted to devote one section of his book project on Baudelaire to allegory, which would be entitled 'Baudelaire Allegorist.' However, the project never came to fruition and what remains is a fragmentary collection of notes called 'Central Park.'[79] There, Benjamin compares seventeenth- and nineteenth-century allegory in their relation to the human body: 'Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire sees it also from within.'[80] In the texts on Baudelaire, Benjamin focuses primarily on the commodity form. Thus, whereas Baroque dramas were melancholy reflections on the inevitability of decay, the devaluation of the new nature became in Baudelaire politically instructive. The corpse that Baudelaire sees from within is the body that has become a commodity, a thing; in other words, it has

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78 *Trauerspiel*, pp.216, 217.

79 However, in his recently-published edition of Benjamin's intended book on Baudelaire, Giorgio Agamben does not consider *Central Park* to be a collection of notes for a chapter on allegory. He describes the text as 'philosophical and methodological sketches' and as 'critico-philosophical reflections' which incorporate metatextual notes about the organisation and distribution of the whole text—and therefore not only of that planned chapter on allegory. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire. Un poeta lirico nell'età del capitalismo avanzato*, ed. by Giorgio Agamben, Barbara Chitussi and Clemens-Carl Härle (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 2012).

80 'Central Park,' SW4, p.186.

been reified. The human body—in the era of high capitalism—is therefore conceived of as something inorganic and, thus, allegory can act over it in all its vigour. In 'Central Park,' Benjamin argued that Baudelaire placed allegory in the service of the decay of the aura and the dissolution of semblance; in a similar way, therefore, albeit more actively destructive, to film.[81] Benjamin claims that in Baudelaire's poetry, allegory presents itself through shock, through a *coup de main*—as Baudelaire describes his way of writing poetry. The traces of rage and spleen in his poetry are used, says Benjamin, in order to lay waste to the harmonious structures of the world.[82] This latter point, he argues, is different to the baroque allegory. Nonetheless, there are some similarities. In the *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin said that 'the allegorical must constantly unfold in new and surprising ways. … Allegories become dated, because it is part of their nature to shock.'[83] As I have mentioned earlier, truth in allegory unfolds in the process of representation, which must be, in turn, visibly fragmentary. In 'Central Park,' Benjamin makes clear that one of the destructive tendencies of allegory is 'its stress on the artwork's fragmentary nature.'[84] In the film medium, he found similar characteristics: on the one hand, the structure of film is based on a series of discontinuous images, and on the other, it has a natural propensity to shock.

Bainard Cowan argues that Baudelaire was probably the last poet in whose work allegories still functioned. The reason for this is that Baudelaire had a 'distance of centuries' from contemporary imagery. Therefore, this distance was 'enough to induce the effect of alienation of image from context.'[85] The contemplation of the object was still a prerequisite in Baroque for its allegorising procedure, but soon became redundant in a society eager for *Erlebnis*. Nonetheless, Benjamin tries to revive allegory in nineteenth-century Paris, where shock is the main experience for the flâneur Baudelaire. It can be argued, with due caution, that he does something similar in the twentieth century, with regard to cinema, where all experience is *Erlebnis* or, more accurately, *Chockerlebnis*. In this way, I would like to argue that both Kafka and Chaplin can be conceived of as allegorical in the same way as

[81] Ibid., p.173.
[82] Ibid., p.174.
[83] *Trauerspiel*, pp.183, 184.
[84] 'Central Park,' SW4, p.191.
[85] Cowan, pp.121, 122.

Baudelaire. In their comparison, Benjamin characterised one side of their face as 'completely immemorial, without history,' the other possessing 'the latest, journalistic topicality.' From this distance, they can display their allegorical way of looking at immanently contemporaneous things. In Brecht, on the other hand, this distance is artificially produced through acting techniques.

## Theory of Distraction

As I suggest in the introduction to this chapter, Benjamin articulated the therapeutic function of film in the 'Work of Art' essay through American slapstick (and Disney films). Benjamin discerned a cathartic release in film reception and used this as the basis for a 'theory of distraction.' This cathartic release was discharged through collective laughter. Thus, Benjamin stressed that the laughter of the audience could be a means to release the repressions of civilisation. In the XVI thesis of the second version of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin says:

> *If one considers the dangerous tension which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large—tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic character—one also has to recognize that this same technologization [*Technisierung*] has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses.* Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. The countless grotesque events consumed in films are a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization. American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies.[86]

Benjamin thought that, although the technologisation of everyday life had caused mass psychoses, it had also created the possibility of psychic immunisation. American slapstick and Disney films, he argued, were able to counteract those mass psychoses, especially through collective laughter, which released therapeutically

[86] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.118. Italics in the original.

unconscious energies. Horkheimer and Adorno, who always remained suspicious of this argument, recognised that laughter was 'a medicinal bath.' However, according to them, this laughter was prescribed by the culture industry as a fraudulent form of happiness and as a capitulation to its own forces.[87] This argument about the release of unconscious, destructive energies is, nonetheless, central, and a necessary counterpart, to the innervation of technology by the audience. According to Benjamin, if the unconscious energies engendered by the rapid technologisation (*Technisierung*) of society are not released, they may mature in the masses and lead to mass psychoses. Thus, this process of catharsis is necessary for the historical function that Benjamin ascribed to film to be carried out: 'To make the enormous technological apparatus of our time an object of human innervation.'[88] In this way, Benjamin conceives of the audience as a *physis* that must release the tensions and dangerous energies of its body before it starts a process of technological innervation. However, he had to recognise that this was not always the case—that laughter was not always positive. In a footnote to the second version, he wrote that the comic effect in some Disney films was always tinged with horror and compared it with the depiction of people dancing in the middle of medieval pogroms.[89] With this argument, Benjamin envisages the possibility that such energy could also be directed to destructive purposes, rather than used for a salutary interpenetration of the collective body formed by the audience.

In her essay 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered,' Susan Buck-Morss analyses the process of innervation formulated by Benjamin regarding the transformation of experience in modernity with the emergence of technology as a factor of everyday life. Following Benjamin's theses on experience, Buck-Morss claims that citizens had been cheated out of their

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[87] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2000), pp.140, 141. Horkheimer and Adorno go on to say that such a laughing audience is a parody of humanity and is suggestive of barbaric life. Benjamin was, in fact, aware of the barbarism and inhumanity inherent to collective laughter. See the final paragraph of 'Experience and Poverty,' SW2, pp.731-736. I will centre my argument in the next chapter precisely on this point.
[88] 'Work of Art' (first version), in Michael W. Jennings and Tobias Wilke, eds., 'Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art,' *Grey Room* 39, Special Issue (Spring, 2010), pp.18, 19.
[89] In the next chapter, I will discuss Benjamin's reservations about his own argument in greater depth by analysing the double nature of Mickey Mouse films and their acceptance of bestiality and violence.

experience. Their synaesthetic system—responsible for the correspondences between the outer and inner stimulus—was thus 'marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock.'[90] As a result, the defence system of the body ends up numbing the organism and repressing memory. In this way, the cognitive function of synaesthetics becomes attenuated and is transformed into a system of anaesthetics; that is, one that shuns experience in order to protect the body and the psyche from the shocks of modern life. Cinema came into being in this 'crisis of perception.' Consequently, Benjamin ascribed to cinema the potential of restoring perception, of undoing the alienation of the corporeal sensorium of modern human beings. The task was, then, to restore the power of the human bodily senses by *passing through* technology. This positive, stimulating adaptation to technology involved an empowering mimetic reception of the external world, as opposed to a mimetic adaptation that paralyses the organism and robs the person of his/her capacity to imagine. Reading through these ideas, Buck-Morss states that Benjamin is asking art to undo the alienation of the senses not by avoiding new technologies, but by adopting them. In 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' Benjamin repeats the same argument about the filmstrip and the conveyor belt that I quoted above. In this passage, Benjamin emphasises the importance of cinema as both training for the senses in order to adapt them to the new experiences of modernity, and a response to their need for consumption:

> technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by film. In a film, perception conditioned by shock [*chockförmige Wahrnehmung*] was established as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film.[91]

In the parallelism between the assembly line in production and the filmstrip in reception, Benjamin implies a mimetic correspondence that allows the worker to enter a cognitive process and understand his or her position in the system of

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[90] Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered,' in *October*, vol. 62 (Autumn, 1992), p.18.
[91] 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' SW4, p.328.

production. At the same time, the audience trains the senses and adapts them to everyday interaction with technology. The physiological, therapeutic function of film is, in short, an attempt to recover the full faculty of the senses. If the human sensorium has been deadened as a consequence of an overexposure to shock, the film aesthetics proposed by Benjamin can activate the senses under the new regime of experience.

For Benjamin, technologically reproducible art also changed the relation of the masses to art, thus transforming a backward attitude of the masses towards a work by Picasso into a progressive one to a film by Chaplin.[92] By having a greater social impact than other arts and by concentrating the reactions into a mass, criticism and enjoyment converged to a greater extent than in contemplative reception. Hence, the masses could feel pleasure in seeing the film while feeling comfortable in judging it with certain expert appraisal, as they did in relation to sport events; whereas in the contemplation of a painting by Picasso, in which enjoyment and critical appraisal were not so intimately bound, uneducated people usually responded with aversion. In a convolute of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin develops this argument further with regard to the political significance of film. In politics and art, he argues, no one will persuade the masses of something that is far removed from their interests, such as, for example, higher art. For Benjamin, 'they can be won over only to one nearer to them.'[93] To prove his argument, he quotes Emmanuel Berl, who claims that Picasso is a revolutionary only because he has revolutionised painting, but as he did not win over the masses, made no revolution in a Leninist sense. Benjamin defines kitsch as art with complete and instantaneous availability for consumption. In this way, art and kitsch appear as opposites. 'But for developing, living forms,' says Benjamin, 'what matters is that they have within them something stirring, useful, ultimately heartening—that they take "kitsch" dialectically up into themselves, and hence bring themselves near to the masses while yet surmounting the kitsch.'[94] For Benjamin, film is the art form most qualified to perform this task today. Thus, he argues that the kitsch elements of film can be overcome and turned into a political weapon. In short, film is more politically effective than other art forms because it is closer to the masses. This argument must be understood in terms of his conception of the

[92] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.116.
[93] AP, convolute [K3a, 1], pp.395, 396.
[94] Ibid.

audience as a body and the reconfiguration of space brought about by film. Laughter, for example, was able to concentrate the reactions of the spectators into a mass and, therefore, to empower the audience as a collective body. In the article 'Chaplin in Retrospect,' Benjamin argues that what gains the respect of the masses is that Chaplin appeals 'to the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses: their laughter.'[95] At the end of the article, Benjamin quotes Soupault, who claims that making people laugh, apart from being the hardest thing to do, is socially also the most important. In 'The Author as Producer,' Benjamin characterises the social function of laughter (in this case with regard to Brecht) as follows: 'convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul.'[96] In his attempt to develop a theory of the comic, Henri Bergson described laughter as the corrective against an individual or collective imperfection, 'a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events.'[97] Therefore, Benjamin could have defined laughter as a socially critical gesture towards events and human beings' behaviour. Thus, through an unconscious release of collective laughter, Benjamin thought that the audience could proceed to innervate mimetically that corrective, critical gesture in the collective body formed by the audience.

However, Adorno and Horkheimer disagreed. For them, as Adorno states in a famous letter of 18th March 1936, collective laughter in the cinema was neither salutary nor revolutionary. Instead, it was 'full of the worst bourgeois sadism.'[98] The laughter of the audience did not produce, then, a critical reflection on the situation of the modern man with regard to technology or a preemptive function against the mass psychoses engendered by the rapid process of technologisation. In support of Benjamin, Buck-Morss argues that the laughter of the masses, although certainly not always critical, could at least incorporate the shocks displayed in the film without creating a defence against them that would paralyse the organism. In this way, the distracted state defended by Benjamin permitted the integration of the shocking and

[95] 'Chaplin in Retrospect,' SW2, p.224.
[96] 'The Author as Producer,' SW2, p.779.
[97] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Glouscester: Dodo Press, 2007), p.39.
[98] Letter from Adorno to Benjamin, from 18 March 1936. Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), pp.130, 131.

fragmentary nature of the apperceptions of modern life and, therefore, trained human beings in the new stimuli with which the rhythms of the city assaulted the human body.

The term that Benjamin used to develop his theory of distraction, *Zerstreuung* (which means both distraction and entertainment), has been highly controversial among Benjamin's acquaintances and Benjamin scholars over the years. For example, Howard Eiland has noticed a certain inconsistency (or, at least, a variable attitude) in Benjamin's use of the term.[99] In essays such as 'Theater and Radio' (1932) and 'The Author as Producer' (1934), which deal with Brecht's theatre, Benjamin understands the term *Zerstreuung* in negative terms, as part of the theatre of convention, with its complementary functions of cultivation and distraction (*Bildung und Zerstreuung*). The term thus stands for a form of bourgeois *divertissement*, an abandonment to diversion, in opposition to Brecht's epic theatre, which raises critical knowledge through methods of interruption, critical distance and the alienation effect. As Eiland notes, in these texts 'the method of montage is opposed to that of distraction.'[100] In the 'Work of Art' essay, however, Benjamin uses the term *Zerstreuung* as a productive distraction, 'as a spur to new ways of perceiving.'[101] Cinema thus acts as a training ground for the sort of reception in distraction which is symptomatic of the new kinetic apperception of all aspects of everyday life. In the fragment in which Benjamin speaks about shock effects in the 'Work of Art' essay, he says that the interruption of the train of thought characteristic of film reception constitutes the shock effects of film, 'which, like all shock effects, seeks to induce heightened attention.'[102] Benjamin here refers to film montage in similar terms to the Brechtian techniques of interruption and, therefore, in opposition to the former, negative attitude towards *Zerstreuung*. This time, therefore, montage appears as the vehicle for his theory of distraction. This apparent contradiction could lead us to think that the term *Zerstreuung*, commonly associated with a complacent *divertissement*, was not the most suitable term for the theory of reception that Benjamin wanted to develop with regard to film.

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[99] Howard Eiland, 'Reception in Distraction,' in *boundary 2*, vol.30, no.1 (Spring, 2003), pp.51-66.
[100] Ibid., p.55.
[101] Ibid., p.59.
[102] 'Work of Art,' SW3, n132.

Benjamin also used the concept *Zerstreuung* in the *Arcades Project*, especially embodied in three figures: the flâneur, the gambler and the collector. The sort of distraction which is hailed in these three figures is one of intoxication—Benjamin thus resumes his theory of intoxication (*Rausch*) from the texts on hashish and the surrealists, but also from the passage about the communal intercourse of the ancients with the cosmos outlined in *One-Way Street*. The relation of these figures with the city, the game tokens or the objects for collection is not only visual, but also tactile and involves the whole sensorium. These combinations of senses, which act in a state of distraction, are illuminated by memory. What is more, only in a state of distraction can the involuntary memory recollect the impressions that an external object leaves on the body.[103] This type of reception in distraction seems to be the same as that hailed by Benjamin in the reception of spectators in cinemas, who are not absorbed into the image and only seek entertainment from the film. However, Benjamin's theories on shock effects and montage are sometimes at odds with this interpretation and it is difficult to conceptualise a simultaneously critical, Brechtian reception and one in which the distracted masses catch fleeting images in the film screen which can trigger their memory.

Carolin Duttlinger has also focused on the different configurations of attention in Benjamin's theory, of which *Zerstreuung* is only one among many.[104] Duttlinger reads through the essay 'The Storyteller' (1936) to argue that, for Benjamin, the state of attention required to incorporate a story to long experience (*Erfahrung*) was a state of deep relaxation. Benjamin claims in this essay that storytelling was the true means for conveying a collective experience and that the decay of storytelling corresponded to the modern loss of experience. The state of mental relaxation needed for storytelling, which existed in manual labour, was eroded with the introduction of industrial labour. The historical consequence of this change in production was the emergence of the novel. The cultural background to this emergence was the novelist withdrawn into himself and an individual reader in

[103] See also Carolin Duttlinger, 'Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configurations of Attention in Walter Benjamin,' in *German Studies Review*, vol. 30, no. 1 (February, 2007), pp.33-54. Duttlinger traces the uses of the term through Benjamin's writings in a similar way to Eiland, from the texts on Brecht to the *Arcades Project*, through a focus on the same three figures: flâneur, gambler and collector.

[104] Duttlinger, 'Benjamin's Literary History of Attention: Between Reception and Production,' in *Paragraph* 32:3 (2009), pp.273–291.

isolation. According to Duttlinger, performative media such as theatre and film represented a certain space of resistance for Benjamin, because they built a collective community whose reception of works in a state of semi-distracted relaxation provided ‘a fertile ground for productive reception.’[105] Duttlinger stresses that Benjamin was especially concerned with the revolutionary potential of a type of silent film in which the audience’s semi-alert mindset resisted complete absorption.[106] According to her, *Zerstreuung* shares some characteristics with the state of relaxation outlined in ‘The Storyteller,’ but not all of them. *Zerstreuung* is intertwined with practice and routine, attentiveness and automatic response and, thus, ‘enables the observer to take in the stream of impressions in a detached yet alert way.’[107] For Duttlinger, the audience of silent films can practice this type of response to both the film screen and city life: ‘a versatile alertness able to respond to the fragmented stimuli of city life without being absorbed by them, attention in a state of distraction.’[108] Therefore, in Benjamin’s ‘theory of distraction’ there is always a dialectical interplay between attention and distraction, concentration and absentmindedness, which Benjamin articulates in an ambivalent and sometimes inconsistent way.

No doubt there are similarities between Benjamin’s ‘theory of distraction’ and Siegfried Kracauer’s ‘cult of distraction’ (*Kult der Zerstreuung*).[109] First of all, Kracauer, in a similar fashion to Benjamin, situates the masses’ addiction to distraction in the tensions to which the working masses are subjected. These tensions are compensated for by their own distraction and entertainment in film. Kracauer is

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[105] Ibid., p.279. At this point, we should question the type of experience that an audience would have in cinemas. The experience provided by film is, doubtless, a shock experience (*Chockerlebnis*), but according to this theory, the state of semi-relaxation might allow the spectators to incorporate some images which are perceived unconsciously into their long experience (*Erfahrung*). The role of the ‘optical unconscious’ would be important in this regard.

[106] In her essay ‘Between Contemplation and Distraction,’ Duttlinger also stresses the *taktisch* and collective nature of film in opposition to traditional, auratic works of art: ‘Where the auratic appeal of traditional art is founded on a distance between artwork and observer, film images have a dynamic, “tactile” quality, which undermines any scope for contemplative viewing, creating instead a “*simultan[e] Kollektivrezeption*”’ (p.41).

[107] ‘Benjamin’s Literary History of Attention,’ p.281.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Kracuaer published the article ‘Kult der Zerstreuung: Über die Berliner Lichtspielhäuser’ in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, on 4th March 1926. ‘Cult of Distraction: On Berlin’s Picture Palaces,’ in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.323-328.

to some extent also ambivalent with regard to the positive and negative elements of the distraction of the masses in the cinemas. On the one hand, he understands that this sort of cultural reception is characteristic of the economic and social reality and, thus, refrains from making any ‘self-pitying’ complaint. Kracauer also reflects on the rapid stimulation of the senses, which leaves no room for contemplation and, indeed, reveals ‘in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions’ the reality which the masses have to confront, making the disorder of society visible.[110] On the other hand, Kracauer laments that this distraction is used as an end in itself, by hiding the reflection of the anarchy of the world and amalgamating the ‘wide range of effects’ into an aesthetic totality, forcing the reality ‘back into a unity that no longer exists.’[111]

Adorno, however, criticised Benjamin’s theory of distraction harshly. In the letter mentioned above, Adorno states that ‘In spite of its startling seductiveness’ he could not find it ‘at all convincing.’[112] The first argument was that he did not think that a spectator could become an expert in film in the same way that a newspaper boy who, leaning on his cycle, could discuss a cycle race with his friends, as Benjamin put it in the ‘Work of Art’ essay. The second argument situated Benjamin’s theses in a communist society in which human beings would no longer be exhausted or stupefied and therefore no longer in need of such a distraction. Here Adorno seems to have forgotten the first thesis of the ‘Work of Art’ essay. There Benjamin had made clear that his assessments about the changes in culture according to the transformations in the conditions of production ‘did not call for theses on the art of the proletariat after its seizure of power’ nor for ‘the art of the classless society,’ but rather ‘for theses defining the tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production.’[113] Thus, Adorno avoids a discussion of Benjamin’s argument in the light of *Aktualität*. Furthermore, he reduces the term *Zerstreuung* to the abandonment to distraction which I have mentioned above. Adorno was right to doubt Benjamin’s ‘theory of distraction’ and his automatically positive endorsement of collective laughter. Benjamin seemed not to take into account that such laughter was, to some extent, carefully manufactured by the culture industry. Some years later,

[110] Ibid., p.326.
[111] Ibid., pp.327, 328.
[112] Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence*, pp.l30, 131.
[113] ‘Work of Art,’ SW3, p.101.

Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that ‘Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work.’[114] They argued that entertainment was pursued as an escape from the mechanisation of work only in order to gather the strength required to cope with that work again. The reactions of the audience, they claimed, were already prescribed by the amusement goods themselves. For that reason, the experiences of the workers in their leisure time were only after-images of the work process itself. However, in the letter exchange around the ‘Work of Art’ essay Adorno misses the central point of Benjamin’s ‘theory of distraction’ and, therefore, the debate split into two different lines of argument. Thus, Adorno does not understand the role of Benjamin’s ‘theory of distraction’ within his film aesthetics, which aimed at a collective transformation of the senses of the audience by a more bodily-oriented engagement with the work of art. The ‘theory of distraction’ outlined by Benjamin introduces the state of attention that the spectators need in order to positively absorb the film image into themselves. Nonetheless, Benjamin’s argument in this regard presents some lacunae and inconsistencies, as I have attempted to show, through his ambivalent use of the term *Zerstreuung*. Some questions remain unanswered. For example, what is the role of the audience: do the images automatically activate the critical response of the semi-alert spectators or, by contrast, are they able to react critically precisely because they are not totally absorbed by the images? The other question that arises is whether this theory is valid for any type of film. The choice of American slapstick and Disney films suggests that Benjamin ascribed this function to certain specific comedies. These, however, were not the only problems that emerged from the theory (as I will discuss in the next chapter).

### The Mechanisation of the Body

Benjamin wondered what made Chaplin humorous: ‘what is it about this behavior that is distinctively comic?’[115] Henri Bergson wrote in his essay about the comic that the idea of an artificial mechanisation of the human body produces laughter. For him, ‘The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact

[114] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.137.
[115] ‘The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression,’ SW3, p.94.

proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.'[116] The connection between this comic effect and allegory is precisely the thingly (*dinglich*), reified character of the body.[117] As I argue above, allegory acts more effectively over an inorganic body. In the case of Baudelaire, over a body that has been penetrated by the commodity form. Cowan argues that, in his writings on Baudelaire, Benjamin suggested that the genuine gaze of allegory is able to expose the fact of reification in capitalism, by which human processes turn into dead objects.[118] In this way, it can be argued that Chaplin performs and quotes the mental and bodily reification of his contemporaries under capitalism both allegorically and comically. Antonis Balasopoulos has argued that the socio-historical relevance of Charlie Chaplin to Weimar Critical Theory was precisely his discourse on and of the body: about its uses, violations and automatism under capitalism. Through an 'emphasis on corporeal fragmentation,' on 'the disarticulation of organic unities and boundaries' and the reassembling of the body in new configurations (as a corporeal analogue to filmic montage), Balasopoulos claims that Benjamin and Kracauer conceptualised Chaplin as a utopian counterforce to reification.[119] His films, seen through the prism of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, presented the audience with the fragmented images of a detotalised world and made the spectators conscious of their own process of self-estrangement.[120]

Chaplin literally interpreted the mechanisation—and consequent reification—of the body in a number of films. In his review of *The Circus* (1928), Benjamin praises Chaplin's imitation of a fairground marionette in the long chase scene in the amusement park between a policeman, a thief and the little tramp. He qualifies this embodiment of the automatisation of a human body as Chaplin's distinctive mask of

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[116] Bergson, p.13.
[117] I am indebted to Prof. Gerard Visser for making me aware of this connection. In his writing on the fetishism of commodities, Marx argued that: 'To the producers … the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.' Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol.1, trans. by Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) p.166. The social relations that appear reified are here, therefore, both the object of allegory and of humour, understood in its most positive version (paraphrasing Bergson) as a social corrective to that reification.
[118] Cowan, p.121.
[119] Antonis Balasopoulos, '"Utopian and Cynical Elements": Chaplin, Cinema, and Weimar Critical Theory,' in Ralph Pordzik, ed., *Futurescapes: Space in Utopian and Science Fiction Discourses* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p.340.
[120] Ibid., p.335.

non-involvement.[121] Benjamin argued that with *The Circus* Chaplin had reached ‘a clear overview of the possibilities open to him.’[122] He suggested that Chaplin worked within his limits and, for this reason, always displayed variations on his greatest themes. In this chase sequence, Benjamin claimed that Chaplin displayed those variations in their full glory. In this game of hide-and-seek, Chaplin passes himself off as a carnival automaton to evade his pursuers. By imitating the mechanical movements of an automaton he not only succeeds in evading the policeman for a while, but also hits the thief with a club and knocks him out. Tom Gunning describes this scene as follows: ‘Chaplin imitates perfectly the stiff motions of this machine, its jerk of inertia between jolts of movement, its sense of endless repetition and, perhaps most hilariously, the grotesque expression the machine makes when it tries to imitate human laughter.’[123] I would like to argue that this mechanisation of the body is, as Bergson noted, a source of laughter and, at the same time, an allegorical representation of the reification of social relations under late capitalism.

Nevertheless, Chaplin’s most famous example of the mechanisation of the body is *Modern Times*, a film released only a few months after Benjamin wrote the ‘Work of Art’ essay. I want to argue that in this film Chaplin can be said to perform a Brechtian *Gestus* in order to render visible the alienation of the human body in modernity. In the letter analysed above, dated 18th March 1936, Adorno alluded to this film. He had already been to see *Modern Times* in London, where the film had been released one month before. Adorno reiterates his belief that Chaplin should not be considered to be an avant-garde artist *even* after *Modern Times*.[124] In the letter, he argues that the valuable elements of the film did not attract the attention of the audience. According to Adorno, this could be recognised in the laughter of the spectators. For him, the proletarians who formed the audience were an objectified subjectivity and therefore could not deduce the positive elements of the film for themselves. Adorno refers to Lenin to argue that the proletariat would only develop consciousness ‘through the theory introduced by intellectuals as dialectical

[121] ‘Chaplin in Retrospect,’ SW2, p.222; ‘Chaplin,’ p.199.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Tom Gunning, ‘Chaplin and the Body of Modernity,’ in BFI Chaplin Research Programme (2004), available online at: http://chaplin.bfi.org.uk/programme/conference/pdf/tom-gunning.pdf [last accessed on 11 June 2014], pp.8, 9.
[124] Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence*, pp.130, 131.

subjects.'[125] The laughter that Adorno heard in the cinema when seeing *Modern Times* proved to him that the audience could not draw the positive elements out of a film like this unless such perception was theoretically mediated.

Benjamin never mentioned *Modern Times* in his texts.[126] Notwithstanding this fact, the film has often been associated with the 'Work of Art' essay, because it deals precisely with the psychoses of assembly-line workers and, therefore, can easily be related to the arguments around his 'theory of reception.'[127] Chaplin wrote in his autobiography that he first had the idea for *Modern Times* when a reporter from the *New York World* told him about healthy young men from the countryside who went to work in Detroit under a factory belt system and, after four or five years, became nervous wrecks.[128] The film describes the misadaptation to technology of a factory worker performed by Chaplin. The character has a nervous breakdown and, after his cure, he is arrested, having been mistaken for a political agitator. In the police patrol car he meets a young girl who is also a social outcast and together they try to cope with the difficulties of modern times in an age of economic depression. The first minutes of the film deal with the portrait of such a nervous wreck. The famous sequence in the assembly line seems in fact to respond to the aforementioned lines on the discontinuity of the film form and its similarity to the process of production in the conveyor belt.[129] There, Chaplin works in an assembly line along with other workers tightening screws. When the character takes a break, his discontinuous movements continue, as though quoting the mechanical dependence of factory workers on the speedy assembly line. These jerky movements Chaplin performs can be defined as the *Gestus* of a worker making readable his bodily and mental alienation in a factory. In the sequence of the feeding machine, Chaplin is mocking

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[125] Ibid., p.129.

[126] The film was not released in France until 24 September 1936—therefore later than the completion of the two first versions of the 'Work of Art' essay, the notes around it and its publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in the French translation of Pierre Klossowski.

[127] Some texts that analyse *Modern Times* through Benjamin are Lawrence Howe's 'Charlie Chaplin in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' Tom McCall's '"The Dynamite of a Tenth of a Second": Benjamin's Revolutionary Messianism in Silent Film Comedy,' Antonis Balasopoulos' '"Utopian and Cynical Elements": Chaplin, Cinema, and Weimar Critical Theory' and Ana Useros' 'El misterio Chaplin.'

[128] Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), p.415.

[129] This connection has been already noted by other scholars. See, for example, Ana Useros, 'El misterio Chaplin,' p.82; and Antonis Balsopoulos, '"Utopian and Cynical Elements": Chaplin, Cinema, and Weimar Critical Theory,' p.342.

Taylorist scientific management and the attempt to rationalise and mechanise all human movements, creating a machine to feed the workers while working, thus eliminating the lunch hour, increasing production and decreasing overheads, as a phonograph states—for machines are the only things that talk in this silent film with sound. With the speeding up of the assembly line, Chaplin becomes more obsessed with tightening screws and loses control over himself. He then enters the gear assembly in the famous scene set in the wheels of the mechanism, finally going crazy as a result of a nervous breakdown.

In 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' Benjamin quotes Marx's *Capital* to convey that working conditions make use of the workers and, in turn, machinery gives workers a technologically concrete form, by which 'workers learn to coordinate "their own movements with the uniformly constant movements of an automaton."'[130] Chaplin's *Gestus* can be understood as the quotability of this process by which the worker learns to act as an automaton; a worker who, Benjamin reminds us later, has been sealed off from experience. The mimetic repetition of the gestures of a machine—as with the workers in the assembly line—is a defensive mechanism which numbs the senses and paralyses the adaptation of the human being to the external world. However, by consciously performing that mimicking of the factory worker on the screen, Chaplin makes his numbing and psychopathological mimesis readable. Furthermore, he educates the masses in the structure of film and its stimuli, similar to the rhythms imposed by the assembly line. Thus, through Chaplin, the audience could be educated in the rhythms imposed by technology in a playful way and, hence, reverse the workers' sensory alienation, the numbing of their senses and the disintegration of their experience. In conclusion, the allegorical function that Benjamin detected in Chaplin can be said, on the one hand, to represent the mental and bodily reification of his contemporaries and, on the other, to recover—through the mediation of the film apparatus—an experience which human beings have been robbed of. Through the allegorical performance of Chaplin—just as through Kafka's parables—this experience could redeem hidden and forgotten elements of the past or from a time immemorial (e.g. from 'the paradise of childhood,' as Eisenstein put it). Mickey Mouse, who will be analysed in the next chapter, presented, by contrast, a

[130] 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' p.328.

totally barbaric experience, a tabula rasa from which a new (in)humanism could be imagined.

# Chapter 5

## Mickey Mouse: Utopian and Barbarian

Mentioned for the first time in a note written in 1931, Mickey Mouse was to have an important, if secondary, position in Benjamin's writings on cinema and experience. In this chapter I want to contextualise Mickey Mouse within Benjamin's treatment of the 'destructive character.' Thus, I will argue that the figure of Mickey Mouse should be understood in connection with Benjamin's essays 'The Destructive Character' (1931), 'Karl Kraus' (1931) and 'Experience and Poverty' (1933). Benjamin's project in this period was to overcome the centrality of the human figure and, more importantly, of individual subjectivity in bourgeois humanism. To that purpose, he envisaged the figures of the *Unmensch* and the barbarian. For Benjamin, Mickey Mouse was an exponent of a new, positive concept of barbarism—and, as I shall argue, not far from the figure of the *Unmensch*. Through him, Benjamin deepened his theory regarding the creation of a collective techno-body, central to his project of anthropological materialism.

Benjamin's engagement with Mickey Mouse is compressed into this specific period. In fact, the span between the first note and the last text in which Benjamin mentions Mickey Mouse does not cover more than five years. Therefore, his engagement with Mickey Mouse cannot be said to be as systematic as with Chaplin. And yet, the former figure has received more detailed attention in academic research than the latter. Two major Benjamin scholars have addressed Benjamin's interest in Mickey Mouse. First, Miriam Hansen in her article 'Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney' (1993) and, secondly, Esther Leslie in the chapter 'Mickey Mouse, Utopia and Walter Benjamin' in her book *Hollywood Flatlands* (2002).[1] Hansen's text explores Benjamin's interest in Mickey Mouse as a paradigmatic

[1] Miriam Hansen, 'Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney,' in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92.1 (January 1993), pp.27-61. A revised version of this article was later published as a chapter ('Micky-Maus') in her book *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (London: University of California Press, 2012), pp.163-182. Esther Leslie, 'Mickey Mouse, Utopia and Walter Benjamin,' in *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London, New York: Verso, 2002), pp.80-122.

figure of alternative reconfigurations of the body and technology. The article hints at some of the anthropological-materialist concerns that informed Benjamin's approach. However, it precedes her explicit acknowledgement of 'anthropological materialism' as a central theme in Benjamin's writings on film and does not, therefore, delve into this aspect.[2] Indeed, Hansen does not situate Benjamin's interest in Mickey Mouse within the 'destructive project,' in contrast to Esther Leslie. Leslie's chapter focuses primarily on the possibilities that Benjamin perceived in Mickey Mouse of portraying and unmasking the alienation of the human body in modern life. She pays special attention—here her approach coincides with Hansen's and mine—to the forms that these cartoons prefigure: new, utopian forms of improving human nature—something that she compares with Fourier and Grandville. My approach concurs in many aspects with these two seminal works. Nonetheless, this chapter will lay more emphasis on the role of anthropological materialism and aims to complete the argument that I have presented and followed throughout the thesis. Thus, I will present Mickey Mouse as a programmatic figure in Benjamin's period of the 'destructive character,' in which his critique of bourgeois humanism gives rise to imagery of alternative imbrications of the human body and technology. I will argue that Benjamin's engagement with Mickey Mouse can be placed at the very core of his project of anthropological materialism, because it is through this figure that he imagines alternative ways of adapting technology to the human body through the mediation of film.

Benjamin began his writings on Mickey Mouse with a note written after a conversation in 1931 with Brecht's regular composer Kurt Weill and Benjamin's close friend, the banker Gustav Glück. This note, under the title 'Mickey Mouse' ('*Zu Micky Maus*'), presents a number of themes which were later developed in subsequent texts: a comparison between Mickey Mouse and fairy tales, a consideration of the radical loss of experience, a critique of bourgeois humanism and the unveiled representation of property relations and human alienation.

[2] Hansen recognised that Benjamin's writings on film were part of his project of anthropological materialism in the article 'Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street' (1999). See the 'Introduction' for a more detailed analysis of Hansen's line of research on the topic. In the revised chapter 'Micky-Maus,' the concept is slightly more pronounced.

An unpublished note entitled '*Erfahrungsarmut*' ('Poverty of Experience') and the essay 'Experience and Poverty'—both written in 1933—mention the figure of Mickey Mouse in the context of Benjamin's debates about experience. In these two texts, Benjamin reflects on the collective character of Mickey Mouse, about the display of these cartoons as 'dream images' for the collective audience in cinemas; and, more importantly, he places Mickey Mouse within a new stage in which experience and culture have been impoverished. Far from lamenting this poverty, Benjamin develops a new, positive concept of barbarism which arises from the ashes of a decadent bourgeois culture. This new culture must break with tradition and develop new art forms which both reflect on and transform the technologically saturated environment of the time. Thus, Benjamin recognises in Mickey Mouse an empowering figure, capable of making the collective dream of new and utopian uses for technology. Finally, Mickey Mouse became one of the cinematographic figures of the first and second versions of the 'Work of Art' essay, although he was eventually withdrawn from the third version on Adorno's suggestion.

Mickey Mouse also appears fleetingly in the *Arcades Project*. Benjamin introduces him in the notes to this historiography of the nineteenth century in relation with two prominent figures of this project: the utopian thinker Charles Fourier and the French caricaturist J. J. Grandville. I will argue that these comparisons may help us to better understand Benjamin's interest in Mickey Mouse. Both figures were able to criticise and unveil the nature of the society they were living in and, at the same time, to provide the space and energy to imagine another world. In this way, they can also be argued to form part, as I will try to show, of the project for a new kind of humanism that Benjamin developed in opposition to both bourgeois classical humanism and Nietzsche's superhuman (*Übermensch*). There are several notes which prove the connection which Benjamin established between Mickey Mouse and these two figures. On the one hand, Benjamin mentions Mickey Mouse in a convolute of the *Arcades Project* as a clue to understanding the extravaganzas of Fourier and his mobilisation of nature:

> For the purpose of elucidating the Fourierist extravagances, we may adduce the figure of Mickey Mouse, in which we find carried out, entirely in the spirit of Fourier's conceptions, the moral mobilization of nature. Humor, here,

> puts politics to the test. Mickey Mouse shows how right Marx was to see in Fourier, above all else, a great humorist. The cracking open of natural teleology proceeds in accordance with the plan of humor.[3]

The political project which Benjamin detected in Fourier and Mickey Mouse was the humour with which these figures parodied—willingly or unwittingly—the ruling conceptions of nature and history. Marx had written of Fourier that he 'was the first to mock the idealization of the petty bourgeoisie.'[4] But it was Engels who said that Fourier was a satirist: 'Fourier is not only a critic; his eternal sprightliness makes him a satirist, and assuredly one of the greatest satirists of all time.'[5] Benjamin understood that Fourier was satirising the organisation of society and the bourgeois ideology which sustained it. In one of the first convolutes devoted to Fourier in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin quotes an autobiographical statement by Fourier: 'if I am worth nothing when it comes to practicing business, I am worth something when it comes to unmasking it.'[6] Benjamin also cites Plekhanov, who said that Fourier was the only contemporary of Hegel who saw through bourgeois relations as clearly as Hegel did.[7] Therefore, Fourier could also be useful in unmasking the way businesses, and by extension capitalism, work and in dissecting the bourgeoisie and its social relations. At the same time he dreamed of oceans of lemonade, humans swimming like fish in the water and flying like birds in the air, able to transform themselves into amphibians and with a life span of at least 144 years.[8] In other words, in Fourier's criticism there was a will to transform society and to pose utopian demands, which may be in or out of reach, but which could provide the energy for such a revolutionary project. Mickey Mouse stands in relation to Fourier as another example in both parodying—more explicitly humorously and less explicitly politically—the ruling conception of nature and technology and stimulating the imagination towards new forms of conceiving them.

[3] *Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), convolute [W8a, 5], p.635.
[4] Ibid., convolute [W4, 2], p.626.
[5] Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (London: Bookmarks, 1993), p.67. Quoted in AP, convolute [W3a, 3], p.625.
[6] AP, convolute [W1, 2], p.621.
[7] Ibid., convolute [W2a, 7], p.624.
[8] Ibid., convolute [W1a], p.621.

In Fourier's extravaganzas Benjamin found a model for his project of exploding the progressive, teleological vision of history and nature. For this reason, he brings up Fourier in the theses 'On the Concept of History' in order to criticise the German Social Democrats' and vulgar Marxists' positivistic conception of labour as the mastery of nature and the deterministic vision of progress as a result of that exploitation. In opposition to this conception, Benjamin defends the kind of collective labour promoted by Fourier which, far from exploiting nature, would help nature 'give birth to the creations that now lie dormant in her womb' and 'would increase efficiency to such an extent that four moons would illuminate the sky at night, the polar ice caps would recede, seawater would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding.'[9] Fourier thus illustrated a different relation of human beings to nature, closer to Benjamin's own politics. In a convolute from the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin compares Fourier's propagation of the phalansteries through explosions with his own political theories, namely: 'the idea of revolution as an innervation of the technical organs of the collective (analogy with the child who learns to grasp by trying to get hold of the moon), and the idea of the "cracking open of natural teleology."'[10] Hence, the idea of the technological innervation into a collective body appears here in relation, first, to the mimetic disjunction that Benjamin perceives in utopian projects and, secondly, to the project to blast out the deterministic vision of history and nature. Thus, Fourier emerges as an important theoretical source for Benjamin's political and utopian project and Mickey Mouse, as I will show, as a visual realisation.

On the other hand, Benjamin also compares Grandville with Mickey Mouse—or, more accurately, with Disney. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin quotes some fragments from an article entitled 'Grandville: le précurseur,' written by Pierre MacOrlan.[11] This article introduces Grandville as a precursor of surrealism and extends his influence to film, specifically to Méliès and Walt Disney. MacOrlan claims that Grandville had been the first draughtsman to have given dreams a reasonable plastic form. Despite the candid perfection of these designs, he writes, an

[9] 'On the Concept of History,' in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol.4, 1938-1940 (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.394.
[10] AP, convolute [W7, 4], p.631.
[11] Pierre MacOrlan, 'Grandville le précurseur,' in *Arts et métiers graphiques*, no.44, 15 December 1934, pp.19-25.

impression of strangeness gives them the sort of anxiety which is common to all dreams.[12] MacOrlan argues that a tragic sign is always present in these illustrations. Thus, he suggests that Grandville's humour always carries within itself seeds of death.[13] On this point, Grandville and Disney differ, for the latter, says MacOrlan, is not melancholic, it does not have any germ of mortification. Perhaps under the influence of this article, Benjamin wrote in another convolute that Grandville's designs had a tendency to allegory.[14] These designs, in which Grandville masks nature with the fashions of his age, are for Benjamin a secularisation of history in the context of nature. In other words, Benjamin saw in these designs a graphic manifestation of the concept of 'natural history' that he had envisaged in the *Trauerspiel* book. For Adorno, the totality of Benjamin's thought could actually be characterised by the term 'natural history.' With the dual polarity of this concept, based on myth and transiency, Benjamin looked at everyday and ephemeral objects as if they were mythical. Thus, writes Adorno, he was 'driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects—as in allegory—but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient, "ur-historical" and abruptly release their significance.'[15] I will argue in this chapter that Benjamin discerned both in Grandville and Mickey Mouse (even if he was not allegorical) a representation of his own concept of 'natural history,' whereby commodities were paraded as being part of nature and nature was presented as being as transitory as fashion. Furthermore, Grandville—like Fourier and Mickey Mouse—unfolds, through the parabolic humour of his depictions of the mores and fashions of his contemporaries, the wonders and anxieties of a society which was increasingly governed by the commodity form.

### 'The Destructive Character'

Benjamin's interest in Mickey Mouse first arose during one of the most anarchic, destructive and, in some aspects, negative periods of his career. In November 1931,

[12] Ibid., p.22.
[13] Ibid., p.24. Quoted by Benjamin in AP, convolute [B4a, 2], p.72.
[14] AP, convolute [G16, 3], pp.200, 201.
[15] Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), p.233.

Benjamin wrote the article 'The Destructive Character' for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In this text, he praised the need for a 'destructive character' which cleared away and rooted out the traces of that age. This destructive impulse has been characterised by Irving Wohlfarth as an 'effective nihilism,' in contrast to a 'Romantic nihilism' which praises destruction for destruction's sake.[16] With this split, Benjamin distances himself from aestheticism. Nonetheless, the text easily lays itself open to the charge of aestheticism for its own flirtation with futurist motifs. In its nihilism, the article comes dangerously close to an unconditional embrace of violence and destruction, but it does so for the sake of a programmatic project to counteract a decadent bourgeois culture—hence the effective or even utilitarian tone of the argument. For a more constructive reading (which does not dispel its destructiveness), the idea of the 'destructive character' should be understood in opposition to the *étui*-man, the bourgeois who looks for comfort in a case with a velvet interior. To illustrate the attitude of the 'destructive character,' Benjamin borrows Brecht's phrase 'Erase the traces' from a poem in *Reader for City-dwellers* (*Lesebuch für Städtebewohner*). Through that phrase, to which he returns in 'Experience and Poverty,' Benjamin criticises the bourgeois interior, which retains the marks of its owner (for example, in the ornaments and decorations of the house) and compels the inhabitant to adopt certain habits. The opposite attitude is pursued in the glass architecture of Scheerbart or the use of steel by the Bauhaus. With the use of these materials, both create rooms in which it is difficult to leave traces. Benjamin reads these examples as attempts to break with a bourgeois tradition which forces everyone to assume predetermined habits. Thus, Benjamin embraces the 'destructive character' of this new barbarism, which employs different materials and imagines different spaces to those that are passed from generation to generation. 'The Destructive Character' is, however, also an obscure text throughout which flits the idea of suicide. Benjamin had planned to commit suicide earlier that year, but did not carry it out. The explanation for this must lie in the last sentence of the article: 'The destructive character lives from the feeling not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble.'[17] This profound negativity turns into the possibility

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[16] Irving Wohlfarth, 'No-Man's-Land: On Walter Benjamin's "Destructive Character",' in *Diacritics*, vol.8, no. 2 (Summer, 1978), p.54.

[17] 'The Destructive Character,' in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol.2, part 2, 1931-1924 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.542.

of using such destructive energy in a new, positive concept of barbarism. This idea, which was further developed in the essay 'Experience and Poverty,' had already been envisaged with regard to Mickey Mouse in the note 'Mickey Mouse,' written the same year.[18] In the latter text, Benjamin argued that Mickey Mouse films 'disavow experience more radically than ever before.'[19] In his reflections on Disney, Sergei M. Eisenstein came to similar conclusions. For him, Disney's creations were made 'on the conceptual level of man not yet shackled by logic, reason, or experience.'[20] Eisenstein thought that it was not irrelevant that Disney cartoons were synthetically created: 'Disney (and it's not accidental that his films are drawn) is a complete return to a world of complete freedom (not accidentally fictitious), freed from the necessity of another primal extinction.'[21] As Benjamin puts it in 'The Destructive Character,' the traces of one's age should be cleared away to make room and to let in some fresh air. Benjamin, like Eisenstein, celebrated this tabula rasa from which Disney's cartoons emerged.

In 'Experience and Poverty,' Benjamin first reflects on the decay of long, vital experience (*Erfahrung*) as a consequence of the development of technology and, more importantly, of the deployment of technological warfare on a planetary scale in the First World War. He conceives of that war as a turning point in which the worldwide deployment of technology brought about a new poverty of humanity, both in culture and experience. According to him, culture had been deprived of experience. He argues that this poverty of experience existed not only on the personal level, but was related to human experience in general. Benjamin labels this stage of human experience as 'a new kind of barbarism.' He takes advantage of the destructive character of this age of poverty to make his argument: once it is realised that culture and human experience are now part of a new kind of barbarism, we can

[18] In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin defined 'The Destructive Character' as a portrait of Gustav Glück which should be taken with a grain of salt. Glück took part, along with Kurt Weill, in the conversation that led to the note 'Mickey Mouse.' Director of the foreign section of the Imperial Credit Bank in Berlin, he was one of Benjamin's closest friends at the time. Glück was, in fact, an acquaintance of Karl Kraus. It is no accident, then, that Benjamin's essay on Kraus was dedicated to Glück. Therefore, his influence on the texts of this time, those related to Mickey Mouse included, seems evident.

[19] 'Mickey Mouse,' SW2, p.545

[20] Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. by Jay Leyda, trans. by Alan Upchurch (London: Methuen, 1988), p.2.

[21] Ibid., p.3.

introduce 'a new, positive concept of barbarism.'[22] Benjamin argues that poverty of experience forces the barbarian to make a new start, to begin with a little and build up further. Consequently, culture can now break with tradition and clear away all the traces of bourgeois conventions. In this way, he champions authors and artists such as the playwright Bertolt Brecht, the science-fiction writer Paul Scheerbart, the painter Paul Klee and the architect Adolf Loos. Benjamin praises the constructive principle of these artists who obey the laws of their interior and not of bourgeois conventions. Reflecting on the names that Scheerbart gives to his characters (Lesabéndio, Labu, Peka, Manesi, given after the first sounds they pronounce) and the new names in Russia after the October Revolution (October, Pyatiletka, Aviakhim), Benjamin makes one of the political statements of this new, positive concept of barbarism which was missing in his previous essay 'The Destructive Character': 'No technical renovation of language, but its mobilization in the service of struggle or work—at any rate, of changing reality instead of describing it.'[23] Art must be mobilised in the creation of a new culture. Mickey Mouse, as a figure radically detached from tradition, partly because he is created synthetically and without an original from which he was made, is included by Benjamin in this select group of positive barbarians.

Mickey Mouse also takes his place in Benjamin's critique of humanism, a project fundamental to the 'destructive character' period. In 'Mickey Mouse,' Benjamin argues that Mickey Mouse characters have thrown off all human resemblance. In 'Experience and Poverty,' Benjamin highlights this same point with regard to Scheerbart's creatures. Thus, he celebrates the fact that the characters of Scheerbart's *Lesabéndio* reject humanlikeness, the principle of humanism.[24] In the case of Mickey Mouse, this non-resemblance, says Benjamin, disrupts the hierarchy of the animal kingdom which supposedly culminates in mankind. In his text on Disney, Eisenstein reflected on the historical turns in which he detected a flight from humanness into animal features in cultural production and argued that it happened in political and philosophical periods in which there was a factual lack of humanness. As an expression of revolt, in these depictions, says Eisenstein, man always stands at the

[22] 'Experience and Poverty,' SW2, p.732.
[23] Ibid., p.733.
[24] Ibid.

centre: 'But man brought back, as it were, to those pre-stages that were traced out by … Darwin.'[25] Man does not appear as the master over animals, but intrinsically confused and interwoven in an animal nature. Grandville provides more clues to understanding this point, as I shall show later in the chapter.

In 'Mickey Mouse,' Benjamin writes that in these cartoons 'mankind makes preparations to survive civilization.'[26] This is a direct allusion to the essay on Karl Kraus he had written earlier that year. In that text, Benjamin argues that mankind has run out of tears but not of laughter. He talks about the nature of a satirist such as Kraus: 'In him civilization prepares to survive.'[27] Thus, Benjamin argues that mankind can only survive through satire, that is, by devouring its adversary. The figure of the satirist is matched with the cannibal, but with one who is accepted in civilisation. At the end of the essay, Benjamin calls for a more real humanism which is not based on a new man, nor on Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, but on an *Unmensch* (a monster, an inhuman, a barbarian). Civilisation is presented here as a stage of human history which must be surpassed.[28] For Benjamin, humankind would have to become an *Unmensch* if it wanted to survive this stage. What is more important for the present discussion is that Benjamin is implying negatively, by lamenting that the average European has not succeeded in uniting his life with technology, that the *Unmensch* must spring not only from the figures of the child and the cannibal (as he puts it later) but from his union with technology.[29] Therefore, the *Unmensch* has to adapt technology to his own body, placing this figure in the centre of the anthropological-materialist project. Benjamin makes clear that such a union is destructive—definitely far from the fetish of creative existence. This new, more real humanity will prove itself only by destruction.

[25] Eisenstein, p.10.
[26] 'Mickey Mouse,' SW2, p.545.
[27] 'Karl Kraus,' SW2, p.448.
[28] This may remind us of Fourier and his organisation of history into 32 stages or series, divided into four phases of seven or nine series each. It should be born in mind that Fourier's project was first and foremost a critique of civilisation. Thus, he criticised 'the small-mindedness of the philosophers who argue[d] that Civilisation is the final stage of social destiny.' Fourier developed a project 'to familiarise human mind with the excess of happiness in store,' because new, happier stages in history were to come in its course to harmony and the apogee of happiness. The happy stages of history lasted indeed seven times longer than ages of unhappiness such as civilisation. Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, ed. by Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson, trans. by Ian Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.42 and 28 (respectively).
[29] 'Karl Kraus,' SW2, p.456.

Uwe Steiner has argued that it was not only Benjamin's conception of the *Unmensch*, but also that of the positive barbarian that was devised in opposition to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Thus, the image of a new humanity that Benjamin outlines according to the positive barbarian contrasts sharply with the heroic vision of the superhuman. In the aphorism 900 in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche speaks of 'another type of barbarian,' who 'comes from the heights: a species of conquering and ruling natures, in search of material to mold.'[30] This barbarian is embodied in Prometheus. The image of the positive barbarian is diametrically opposed to this. Benjamin's barbarian is antiheroic. Words such as conquering or mastering are not in his vocabulary. As I have emphasised, Benjamin called for the adoption of a technology that would produce a relation of interplay between humanity and nature, but never a relationship of domination over each other. The *Unmensch* and the barbarian, who unite their lives with technology, adopt precisely this type of technology, i.e. 'second technology.' Thus, 'For the perspective of technology,' writes Steiner, 'Benjamin's positive barbarism is conceived as antiheroic.'[31] Furthermore, Steiner claims that his disconcerting definition of politics in 'World and Time' (1919-1920)—'the fulfillment of an unimproved [*ungesteigerten*] humanity'[32]—can only be understood as 'a turn of phrase in opposition to Nietzsche.'[33] In a fragment from the same time, 'Capitalism as Religion' (1921), Benjamin reads the conception of the superhuman as a 'breaking open of the heavens by an intensified [*gesteigerte*] humanity.'[34] For Benjamin, the superhuman is 'the first to recognize the religion of capitalism and begin to bring it to fulfillment.'[35] It is worth noting that Benjamin defines capitalism in this same fragment as 'a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction.'[36] Therefore, his new, more real humanity in the guise of the positive barbarian is distanced from both capitalism and its fulfillment in the *Übermensch*. Steiner argues that 'Benjamin's politics are not concerned with

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[30] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p.479.
[31] Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to his Work and Thought*, trans. by Michael Winkler (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p.127.
[32] 'World and Time,' in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol.1, 1913-1926 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.226.
[33] Steiner, 'The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political,' trans. by Colin Sample, *New German Critique*, no. 83, special issue on Walter Benjamin (Spring - Summer, 2001), p.62.
[34] 'Capitalism as Religion,' SW1, p.289.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

Nietzsche's human being, an enhanced hybrid,' but rather with 'the decline of the traditional human being and his rebirth in an as yet unknown form of humanity.'[37] For this reason, Benjamin is especially interested in Scheerbart's creatures. The inhabitants of the asteroid Pallas have no gender. Furthermore, the decision to increase or reduce the Pallasian species is entirely in their hands, for all they have to do is 'to crack open the nuts found in the star's lead veins, and a new Pallasian would spring out of every nut.'[38] When they are born, they are named after the first sounds they babble. In the first hours after their birth, they are able to understand and to speak the Pallasian language and in a few days they grow to the size of mature Pallasians. New-born Pallasians have lived previously in other worlds and, for that reason, the first thing that they do in Pallas is to write down the stories recounted by the new creatures, since everything they can tell is incomparable with the experiences told by preceding Pallasians. They die when they grow dry and become nearly transparent. At that point, they can ask to be sucked up by a healthy Pallasian. Thus, the living Pallasian absorbs the dying one through his pores. Unlike Jules Verne's characters, that is, ordinary French or English gentlemen who travel around the planet and the cosmos in amazing vehicles, Benjamin remarks that 'Scheerbart is interested in inquiring how our telescopes, our airplanes, our rockets can transform human beings as they have been up to now into completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures.'[39] Indeed, Pallasians are able to transform their eyes into microscopes, to develop fountain pens out of their fingers, to incorporate magnifying lenses to their own photographic apparatuses, to contort themselves into radio receivers because of the electrical qualities of their bodies. In short, unlike the average European, Scheerbart's creatures are paradigmatic *Unmenschen* who can unite their bodies with technology. In his late article on Scheerbart, written in French, Benjamin describes him as a twin brother of Fourier: 'In Fourier's extravagant fantasies about the world of the Harmonians, there is as much mockery of present-day humanity as there is faith in a humanity of the future.'[40] For Benjamin, these same elements are at stake in Scheerbart.

[37] Steiner, 'The True Politician,' pp.76, 77.
[38] Paul Scheerbart, *Lesabéndio*, trans. by Christina Svendsen (Cambridge, Mass.: Wakefield Press, 2012), p.48.
[39] 'Experience and Poverty,' SW2, p.733.
[40] 'On Scheerbart,' SW4, p.387.

It is likely that Benjamin envisaged a similarly utopian, barbarian creature in Mickey Mouse. Hence, it can be argued that Mickey Mouse also takes part in this satiric barbarism, able not only to survive, but also to destroy civilisation as we understand it. Thus, the figure of Mickey Mouse could be useful for the collective audience of these films to understand through humour the possibilities of technology over the organic human body if humanity separates once and for all from the bourgeois conception of humanism. In this way, the body of Mickey Mouse, which has incorporated technology into its own nature, should be appropriated by the collective, by way of a mimetic interpenetration of image- and body-space.

The new poverty of experience which has descended on humanity paves the way to building a new world afresh without the burden of tradition and everyday life. In 'Mickey Mouse,' Benjamin argues that these cartoons participate in the same fresh world as fairy tales. Both in Mickey Mouse films and in fairy tales, the most vital events are evoked in an unsymbolic and unatmospheric way. In the note '*Erfahrungsarmut*,' Benjamin repeats the same idea and suggests that the only way to tell a tale nowadays in which the world is as new and fresh as that of children is in fairy-tale films (*Filmmärchen*).[41] In his reflection on fairy tales, Benjamin sees a possibility of counteracting myth. In 'Mickey Mouse,' he alludes to a tale by the Grimm brothers in connection to Mickey Mouse: 'All Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is.'[42] 'The Storyteller' (1936) clarifies what Benjamin means with this sentence: the figure of the young man who leaves home 'shows us that the things we are afraid of can be seen through.'[43] According to him, fairy tales show us that nature prefers to align with man and not with myth and, therefore, the liberating magic of these tales is displayed for the purpose of freeing humanity. Benjamin illustrates this point with the image of the animals that go to the aid of the child. Thus, Benjamin understands that nature, animals included, is on the side of humanity. It is only nature understood in mythical terms which is a threatening force for mankind.

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[41] 'Erfahrungsarmut,' *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.2, part 3, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p.962.
[42] 'Mickey Mouse,' SW2, 545.
[43] 'The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,' in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol.3, 1935-1938 (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.157.

Horkheimer and Adorno also detected that mankind was sinking into a new kind of barbarism.[44] However, they did not see the positive, reverse side of this process, as Benjamin did. For them, the programme of the Enlightenment was aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty by disenchanting the world and dissolving myth.[45] Enlightenment logic originated in the course of liberating humanity from a threatening nature, which eventually led to society's control over nature. Nonetheless, the rationality of civilisation, in order to exercise domination over non-human nature and over other men, denies that human beings are themselves nature. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this very denial of nature in man 'is the germ cell of a proliferating mythic irrationality.'[46] Thus, with this denial, the goal of the control of nature is distorted and means are enthroned as ends in themselves. Eventually, the domination of man over himself, in which the individual grounds his selfhood, entails 'the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken.'[47] Horkheimer and Adorno compare this process with a sacrifice. For them, the 'history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice. In other words: the history of renunciation.'[48] For this very reason, Benjamin wants to surpass the stage of civilisation in which nature is mastered by humanity—and technology is only used for that purpose. For him, humanity, animals, nature and the cosmos form a single body: they all are nature. The domination of any of these elements by another always entails a form of self-destruction.

## Collective Dream

Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Benjamin wanted to dissect the myths of the Enlightenment. However, in opposition to them, he thought that the energy provided by these mythic powers could be rechanneled and deployed in a project of social transformation. Benjamin envisaged this double-edged project with regard to Mickey Mouse, who was conceived as a 'dream image' for the collective. When in the

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[44] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2000), p.xi.
[45] Ibid., p.3.
[46] Ibid., p.54.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid., p.55.

*Arcades Project* Benjamin analysed the appearance of 'dream images' in the creation of mass culture, he suggested that there was always a layer of dreams which both sustained and exceeded the historical order of production. In this way, Miriam Hansen argued that for Benjamin 'the phantasmagorias of modernity were by definition ambiguous, promising a classless society while perpetuating the very opposite.'[49] As 'dream images,' these phantasmagorias could be transformed and incorporated, as energy, into strategies for resistance. Marx used the term 'phantasmagoria' in the very core of his discussion of the fetishism of commodities in the first volume of *Capital*. According to Marx, the mysteriousness of the commodity form consists of the fact that 'the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things' and hence reflects the relation of the workers to their labour as a social relation between objects.[50] The commodity form and the value relation of the products have no connection with the physical nature of the commodity or the social relations which arise out of them. For this reason, Marx says that 'the definite social relation between men themselves' assumes here 'the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things.'[51]

Benjamin was also indebted to Adorno for this concept. In the *Arcades Project* he quotes Adorno's definition of phantasmagoria in *In Search of Wagner*:

> as a consumer item in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us how it came into being. It becomes a magical object, insofar as the labor stored up in it comes to seem supernatural and sacred at the very moment when it can no longer be recognized as labor.[52]

After this definition, Adorno adds an important point about the dream nature of phantasmagorias: 'The phantasmagoria tends towards dream not merely as the

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[49] Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology"' in *New German Critique*, no.40, special issue on Weimar Film Theory (Winter, 1987), pp.191, 192.
[50] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol.1, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin,1976), p.165.
[51] Ibid. I have slightly modified the translation. The original sentence says: 'Es ist nur das bestimmte gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Menschen selbst, welches hier für sie die phantasmagorische Form eines Verhältnisses von Dingen annimmt.' *Das Kapital, Bd. I* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968), p.86.
[52] AP, convolute [X13a], p.670.

deluded wish-fulfilment of would-be buyers, but chiefly to conceal the labour that has gone into making it.'[53] Phantasmagoria is thus the application of the concept of commodity fetishism to the sphere of consumption and cultural reception. Margaret Cohen suggests that, in the *Arcades Project*, 'Benjamin extends Marx's statement on the phantasmagorical powers of the commodity to cover the entire domain of Parisian cultural products.'[54] As I have suggested above, Benjamin thought that those aspects turned to the side of dreams in phantasmagorias could be redeemed and used as a source of energy to empower and awaken the collective.

In Benjamin's project to rechannel the energy deployed by a phantasmagoria such as Mickey Mouse films, there was a utopian will which could conjoin the utopias of both 'first' and 'second nature.' For Benjamin, the utopias of 'second nature' were those concerning technology and society; whereas those of 'first nature' were based on issues such as life and death and focused primarily on the human body. Benjamin suggested that the problems of 'second nature' were always closer to realisation than those of 'first nature.' As I have argued in the second chapter, Benjamin claimed that in the Soviet Union some of the utopian demands of 'second nature' had been partly realised. Nevertheless, those utopian concerns related to 'first nature' had been gradually put aside. Benjamin notes that both the Marquis de Sade and Fourier envisioned utopias of 'first nature' in their direct realisation of hedonistic life. For that reason, Benjamin adds that Fourier's work is the first historical evidence of his demand that the problems concerning the individual, such as issues of passion and instinct, be approached as requiring resolution.[55] In the second version of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin claims that there is a twofold utopian will in revolutions, because revolutions do not only set their sights on goals within their reach, but also on utopian goals. Benjamin illustrates this idea with the image of a child who, in the process of learning how to grasp a ball, stretches out its hand for the moon. For Benjamin, 'Revolutions are innervations of the collective—or, more precisely,

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[53] Adorno, *In the Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1981), pp.91, 92.

[54] Margaret Cohen, 'Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria,' in *New German Critique*, no. 48 (Autumn, 1989), p.88.

[55] In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin places cruelty in Sade at the opposite extreme to the idyllic world of Fourier. As opposites, though, they could come together, because the Sadist may find in the Fourierist a partner who longs for the punishment and humiliations inflicted by him. AP, convolute [W 11, 2], pp.638, 639.

efforts at innervation on the part of the new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology.'[56] Benjamin's political and utopian project was that the collective would adopt 'second technology'—which aimed to establish a playful relation between social and natural forces—into its own body. In Benjamin's anthropological-materialist conception of revolutions, the collective has to transform and adapt the new technologies into the new social body which emerges out of such revolts—thus creating a collective *physis*. Film, as a play form of 'second nature,' could accelerate this adaptation of technology to such a collective body. Benjamin thought that in the realm of cinema a surplus of energy was produced and could be discharged in the audience. The collective could thereby appropriate 'second nature' as its own 'first nature' in technology and, with the surplus of energy derived from this collective enterprise, impose revolutionary demands on both technology and on the first, organic nature. For Benjamin, this stream of energy in revolutions was spontaneous and unmediated by theory. In the 1935 exposé of 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,' Benjamin wrote:

> If it is the misfortune of the workers' rebellions of old that no theory of revolution directs their course, it is also this absence of theory that, from another perspective, makes possible their spontaneous energy and the enthusiasm with which they set about establishing a new society.[57]

This is one of the fragments in which Benjamin's endorsement of revolutionary spontaneity comes most clearly to the fore. Nonetheless, immediateness and spontaneity are recurrent themes in his theories of and around revolutionary practice.[58] I would like to suggest that Benjamin employs the same conception of spontaneity theorised in the quote above with regard to surrealism and cinema

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[56] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (second version), SW3, n124.
[57] 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,' SW3, p.43.
[58] In 'Critique of Violence' (1921), for example, Benjamin hails the immediateness of 'divine violence.' In that case, to be immediate means that such violence is not used as a means to an end. Divine violence is law-destroying, expiatory, striking, lethal and yet bloodless. Like 'mythical violence,' it is not a means to an end, but an expression. By contrast, 'divine violence' breaks with law, that is, it is not law-making like 'mythical violence.' Benjamin suggests that 'divine violence' can be manifested in revolutionary violence. Therefore, he may imply that such violence would appear immediately, not only because it is not a means to an end, but also because there is no revolutionary theory that supports it. 'Critique of Violence,' SW1, pp.236-252.

reception. In film, therefore, a revolutionary empowerment—albeit on a smaller scale—takes place as a rehearsal for revolutions. Adorno was not incorrect to notice a lack of theoretical mediation in these themes.[59] I claim that a critique of immediateness and, in particular, of the rush of energy through the collective is opportune. Often, Benjamin falls into an enthusiastic embrace of spontaneous rebellions, without considering the need for theory and organisation which are required for a radical transformation. This spontaneity may certainly bring along a current of energy which can be channelled through the collective, but such energy can also serve, as Benjamin recognises elsewhere, to deploy self-destructive actions. The theoretically-immediate (although technologically-mediated) collective plug-in to the energy transmitted by Mickey Mouse films is one of the most controversial points in Benjamin's theory. Eventually, he became aware of the problems of this argument and wrote a footnote in the second version of the 'Work of Art' essay to address the ambiguity of Mickey Mouse and his deployment of energy.

In 'Experience and Poverty,' Benjamin uses a language of dream similar to that which is used in the *Arcades Project*, and conceives Mickey Mouse as a 'dream image'—an idea to which Benjamin returns in the 'Work of Art' essay.

> Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for contemporary man.[60]

Benjamin thus understands cinema reception as a dream and Mickey Mouse as a supplier of energy through the collective audience. This is a clear reference to technological innervation. As I have argued above, Benjamin understood that the adaptation of technology to the collective body would come through an innervation or rush of energy. In the 'Surrealism' essay, Benjamin always uses the image of an

[59] For similar reasons, he was suspicious of Benjamin's idea of the 'collective' and his 'immediate concept of function.' Adorno accuses Brecht of having influenced Benjamin in this regard, although Benjamin started to use these concepts—at least 'collective'—before his friendship with Brecht. Letter from Adorno to Benjamin, *c*.2-4 August 1935, 'Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on the Essay "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century",' SW3, p.57.

[60] 'Experience and Poverty,' SW2, pp.734, 735.

electric discharge to talk about the revolutionary, empowering quality of art over a collective body. I have argued that in cinema a similar interpenetration between image- and body-space takes place. In this fragment Benjamin expands his theory with regard to Mickey Mouse, who functions as the supplier of energy to the collective. In *Erfahrungsarmut*, Benjamin said that these films may be incomprehensible to an individual, but not to an entire audience, since Mickey Mouse governs the whole public rhythmically.[61] Benjamin is referring to the synchronisation not only of image and sound—a completely novel phenomenon at the time which was in fact known precisely as 'Mickey-Mousing'—but also a synchronisation of that audiovisual image with the audience and, therefore, also among the individuals of the audience. In the first version of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin used the term 'regrouping of apperceptions' to talk about reception in distraction. Thus, he wrote that in cinema, 'where the collective seeks distraction, the tactically [*taktisch*] dominant element that rules over the regrouping of apperception is by no means lacking.'[62] There is, therefore, a tactile and tactical reception of the cinematographic image from the audience. The regrouping of the energy coming from the screen better renders the idea of an empowering collective reception in cinema than the 'concentration of reactions into a mass,' used in the second and third versions. Benjamin also explains this idea in the section devoted to the 'optical unconscious' in the (first and second versions of the) 'Work of Art' essay. There, he develops the idea of cinema as a dream and the appropriation of individual perceptions by a collective perception:

> The ancient truth expressed by Heraclitus, that those who are awake have a world in common while each sleeper has a world of his own, has been invalidated by film—and less by depicting the dream world itself than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse.[63]

[61] 'Erfahrungsarmut,' GS vol.2, part 3, p.962.
[62] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (first version), trans. by Michael W. Jennings, in Michael W. Jennings and Tobias Wilke, eds., 'Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art,' *Grey Room* 39, special issue (Spring 2010), p.34.
[63] 'Work of Art,' SW3, p.118.

Unlike dreams, the realm of film makes it possible to adapt and gather a single perception of a character on the screen into the collective body of the audience. Benjamin was at that time very much concerned with developing a theory of collective dreams with which to understand the image of Paris in the nineteenth century in his *Arcades Project*. He wanted to create a method of analysing the dialectical turning point from a sleeping to a wakeful state at the moment of awakening, that is, between the 'dream images' and phantasmagorias of the nineteenth century and their interpretation. In a convolute of this book, in which Benjamin reflects on the psychic and corporeal states which psychoanalysis studies, he declares: 'This thoroughly fluctuating situation of a consciousness each time manifoldly divided between waking and sleeping has to be transferred from the individual to the collective.'[64] Through the idea of a collective dream, Benjamin wanted to provoke in the moment of awakening—i.e. in its interpretation—the preservation of the collective wish images by dissolving the spell of such a phantasmagoria. Film, and Mickey Mouse is a good example in this regard, is part of these phantasmagorias of capitalism. The energies which may empower the collective to imagine a better nature—in the tradition of Fourier—should be rescued and incorporated to the collective body of the audience; while the deployment of such energies should be used for the collective transformation of society.

Benjamin's theory of awakening, as the dialectical point between the present and what has been (*das Gewesene*), aimed to dispel the myth which sustained the social order as it was—since, according to him, 'That things are "status quo" is the catastrophe.'[65] At the same time, it intended to rescue the unrealised dreams from the past. Benjamin was interested in Mickey Mouse both because it was a product belonging to big film capital and because he thought that through his methodology of dream he could rescue the utopian images displayed by these cartoons from their instrumental use in the service of capitalism. The utopian will which Mickey Mouse can awaken in the collective audience is understood here in terms of a surplus of energy, the energy that contemporary man is lacking in reality.

[64] AP, convolute [Gº, 27], p.844.
[65] Ibid., convolute [N9a, 1], p.473.

### Union with Technology

The fragment about Mickey Mouse in 'Experience and Poverty' continues with a description of the relation which is performed in these films between nature and technology:

> [Mickey Mouse's] life is full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and prosecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds, and the sea. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged.[66]

First of all, Benjamin understands that the relation of Mickey Mouse to technology is a playful and an ironic one—not like the too serious and non-ironic relation to technology impressed on Soviet people. Mickey Mouse cartoons hyperbolise the promises of technology in a similar way to Grandville and, at the same time, improvise out of these wonders a regime of play and dance. Technology appears hidden, as if it had already been adapted and embodied by the characters, which can fly like aeroplanes (Pluto with his ears in *The Moose Hunt*, dir. Burt Gillett, 1931) or, at least, drop like parachutes (Minnie with the aid of her pants in *Plane Crazy*, dir. Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, 1928). Hence, in a playful and utopian way, Mickey and the other creatures improvise technologically-led actions out of their own bodies. Miriam Hansen says that Mickey Mouse characters do not engage with technology as an external force, in terms of the mechanisation of their own bodies, but rather 'they hyperbolize the historical imbrications of nature and technology through humor

[66] 'Experience and Poverty,' SW2, p.735. When Benjamin talks about furniture, he may be talking about pianos—doubtless Mickey's favourite object—which take life and, as happens in *Jazz Fool* (dir. Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, 1929), take revenge on Mickey, who has been playing frantically and brutally over it, biting him with a mouth and teeth made out of its keys. Out of the branch of a tree, on the other hand, Mickey Mouse is able to make a saxophone, that is, to improvise a technological instrument directly from nature, and play it in *Jungle Rhythm* (dir. Walt Disney, 1929). Finally, the sea also seems to have adopted another nature in films such as *Wild Waves* (dir. Burt Gillett, 1929) and *The Castaway* (dir. Wilfred Jackson, 1931), where the waves change their form according to what Eisenstein coined 'plasmaticness,' acquiring completely new poly-formic capabilities.

and parody.'[67] This fusion between nature and technology reminds us of Benjamin's appreciation of Scheerbart's creatures, through which one explores 'how our telescopes, our airplanes, our rockets can transform human beings as they have been up to now into completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures.'[68] In other words, Benjamin thought that one could recognise in these creatures what new beings will resemble once they have merged with technology. Mickey Mouse, then, accomplishes the task demanded of the *Unmensch*: to unite his life with technology. This is, indeed, the project that Benjamin started as early as 1922 with 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem' and tracked through the concept of 'anthropological materialism.' Thus, Benjamin argues that the incorporation of technology in these characters, who have thrown off all human resemblance, has improved their own nature. This improved nature is precisely Benjamin's epitome of utopia.[69] Hence, Mickey and company appear as examples of the utopian adaptation of technology to the 'first nature' of the human body.

In this fragment, therefore, Benjamin suggests that in Mickey Mouse films nature and technology have merged or, in other words, the 'first nature' of the human/animal organic bodies and the 'second nature' in which technology—first and second—is inscribed have finally fused. The living and non-living characters have embodied both the utopian and the rationalistic features of technology—hence the dialectic between the mechanical rhythm and the playful regime that they follow. This synthesis takes place between a 'first nature' untouched by man (forest or jungle and animals) and the promises of a technology which, as Fourier conceived, should serve humanity by providing greater comfort.[70] Benjamin continues:

> And to people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is

[67] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p.174.
[68] 'Experience and Poverty,' SW2, p.733.
[69] Here I follow Esther Leslie's definition of (Benjamin's) utopia as 'an improved nature—and an improved relationship to nature, such as imagined by Fourier—and approved by Marx.' *Hollywood Flatlands*, p.104.
[70] Although the milieu of the farm and the barnyard, which are central in these cartoons, are all man-made constructions.

> solved in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot-air balloon.[71]

This last part of the fragment may sound very uncritical. The relief that the masses feel when they go to the cinema after working seems more like a safety valve providing momentary relief from the tensions of everyday life. Probably the audience would like to have an anthropomorphised car like Mickey's in *Traffic Troubles* (dir. Burt Gillett, 1931), which overtakes other cars by extending its tyres and passing over or avoiding a puddle by rolling on the car's bodywork. For, even though Mickey does not avoid the problem of traffic in big cities, at least he faces it in a playful and fanciful way. This relief can also be placed in relation to the therapeutic function of laughter which Benjamin presents in the 'Work of Art' essay. Therefore, such relief would pre-empt the outbreak of psychoses among the masses and would help to innervate, in a salutary fashion, technology into the body of the audience. Along the same lines, I would like to present another reading of this fragment. According to this reading, the 'relief' to which Benjamin refers could be understood as the simultaneous embodiment of the therapeutic and the utopian interpenetration of image- and body-space in the collective sphere of film reception. Thus, the argument I have presented about the creation of a collective body in the realm of cinema reception here reaches its full meaning. In this way, the collective body of the audience can adapt the energy that the cartoons disseminate and which is lacking in their lives. Hence, the phrase that Benjamin uses with regard to Surrealism, 'to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,'[72] could be applied to these films. The innervation of technology, and, more importantly, the dreams of a better nature which technology can supply humanity, can be actualised in the collective body. This *physis* can, in turn, take advantage of that rush of energy for a project of social—and organic—transformation. We can understand that what Benjamin is doing here is calling for an interpenetration of technology into the collective body of the audience such as the characters of Mickey Mouse display. As Benjamin prefigures in the fragment on Heraclitus, the merging of (human) nature and

[71] 'Experience and Poverty,' SW2, p.735.
[72] 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,' in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol.2, part 1, 1927-1930 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.215.

technology takes place on a collective rather than an individual basis. That is, the interpenetration of technology and nature is appropriated and embodied by the collective body that Benjamin had prefigured in ‘Outline of the Psychophysical Problem.’

It could be argued that, from this interpenetration of ‘second nature’ into the ‘first nature’ of a collective body, a third, ideal conception of nature would emerge. The idea of a ‘third nature’ was conceived by Lukács in ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.’ For him, this ‘third nature’ is the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the problems of a reified existence, in which ‘nature’ refers to

> authentic humanity, the true essence of man liberated from the false, mechanising forms of society: man as a perfected whole who has inwardly overcome, or is in the process of overcoming, the dichotomies of theory and practice, reason and the senses, form and content; man whose tendency to create his own forms does not imply an abstract rationalism which ignores concrete content; man for whom freedom and necessity are identical.[73]

However, in this fragment Benjamin at no point presents the possibility of an *Aufhebung*. He instead proposes a back-and-forth movement. This collective innervation would never mean a total sublation of the problems of reification. It would not solve the subject/object problem, the reification of the human body and the shrivelling of experience all at once. For this reason, at the end of ‘Experience and Poverty,’ Benjamin asks the reader to step back and maintain a critical distance from the fragment on Mickey Mouse.

He then analyses the impoverishment of the world after the First World War, with the economic crisis and approaching war. According to Benjamin, most people have to now start anew and with few resources; they should rely on those who have founded the cause of the absolutely new, that is, those artists who have adopted a new, positive concept of barbarism:

[73] Georg Lukács, ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,’ in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), pp.136, 137.

> In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is that it does so with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good. Let us hope that from time to time the individual will give a little humanity to the masses, who one day will repay him with compound interest.[74]

This fragment recalls some points outlined in the essay on Karl Kraus and in the note on Mickey Mouse. Laughter is the instrument through which people, in the guise of barbarians, are ready to outlive a culture based on the tradition of bourgeois humanism. The collective nature of this laughter is also important for the transformation demanded of humanity. Thus, in a paralipomenon to the 'Karl Kraus' essay, Benjamin states that humanity 'must be abandoned on the level of individual existence so that it can come forth at the level of collective existence.'[75] Matthew Charles has argued that Benjamin's engagement with Kraus was based on his appeal to surpass the individualism of bourgeois humanism.[76] This could lead to Benjamin's utopian, anthropological-materialist project of the consummation of the individual *Leib* in the collective. The project, Charles argues, is also devised as an inversion of Nietzsche's superhuman: 'the figure of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* is countered with the technologically collectivized and abject posthumanism of the *Unmensch*: the "monstrous" or "inhuman," as an inverted Nietzschean pragmatism.'[77] The collective laughter that occurs in cinema theatres is, in fact, barbaric. However, it should be remembered that the barbarian is able to incorporate technology into his/her own existence. Horkheimer and Adorno recognise that this laughter was barbaric and the laughing audience in cinemas 'a parody of humanity.'[78] They read the harmony of this collective laughter as a caricature of solidarity which ultimately pursues a conciliatory function. For Benjamin, by contrast, this act of barbarism opens up the chance to step into a new kind of humanism. As I argued in the last chapter, the therapeutic and physiological function of this collective laughter was

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[74] 'Poverty and Experience,' SW2, p.735.
[75] In *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.2, part 3, p.1102. Quoted by Uwe Steiner in *Walter Benjamin*, trans. by Michael Winkler.
[76] Matthew Charles, 'Walter Benjamin and the Inhumanities: Towards a Pedagogical Anti-Nietzscheanism' in Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei, Adam Staley Groves and Nico Jenkins, eds., *Pedagogies of Disaster* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum, 2013), p.336.
[77] Ibid., p.337.
[78] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.141.

precisely to produce a salutary mimetic innervation of technology after the release of dangerous, masochistic energies out of the collective body of the audience. This barbarian laughter, therefore, could facilitate the promised union with technology and, in turn, break with bourgeois notions of humanism, based—among other things—on individual subjectivity.

## Mickey Mouse and the Commodity Form

The text 'Mickey Mouse' stresses a political potential in the cartoons' representation of human alienation and property relations. This potential was not present in 'Experience and Poverty,' whereas in the 'Work of Art' essay it only appeared in connection to the performance of the actor. As I have argued with regard to Charlie Chaplin, according to Benjamin the audience could take advantage of the performance of the actor in the form of a test in which the actor's self-alienation is assessed by the spectators. Benjamin seemed to identify a similar feature in the figure of Mickey Mouse. In the first point of the note 'Mickey Mouse,' he analyses these films through the representation of property relations. Thus, Benjamin writes that 'here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen.'[79] Benjamin refers to the visual representation of the dismemberment of the bodies of the characters and to the estrangement that someone feels when he/she has been robbed of his/her own body. According to Esther Leslie, these cartoons 'make clear that even our bodies do not belong to us,' and as such, Benjamin conceives them as 'object lessons in the actuality of alienation.'[80] Miriam Hansen argues that bodily fragmentation was rare in Mickey Mouse and claims that it was far more present in other figures of animation such as Felix the Cat, Koko the Clown and Oswald the Lucky Rabbit.[81] *Pace* Hansen, I will show some examples from the early Mickey Mouse in which there is a clear representation of this fragmentation of the body. For example, in *Steamboat Willie* (dir. Ub Iwerks and Walt Disney, 1928), the first distributed film featuring Mickey Mouse, the captain of the boat Pete grabs Mickey by the waist and turns his body into a long sausage.

[79] 'Mickey Mouse,' SW2, p.545.
[80] Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p.83.
[81] Hansen, 'Of Mice and Ducks,' p.45 and *Cinema and Experience*, pp.176, 177.

Mickey then has to put his mutilated body back together with his own hands. In *The Barn Dance* (dir. Walt Disney, 1929), Mickey dances clumsily with Minnie and steps on her feet, making her legs longer. In order to recover the usual form of her legs, Minnie ties a knot in her leg and cuts the remaining part with a scissor.

For Benjamin, these cartoons make manifest the alienation of people in the machine age. The people in the audience, at seeing this representation, are able to recognise their own life. He explains the huge popularity of the films as owing to this interpretation. In the note 'Mickey Mouse,' Benjamin wrote that 'The route taken by Mickey Mouse is more like that of a file in an office than it is like that of a marathon runner.'[82] Mickey is, therefore, embodied in a reified object such as a file, which follows the rhythms of work. Such a regime, however, is both repeated and disrupted by a logic of play. Hansen argues that 'the frantic movements of the animated creature bare the irrational flipside of the regime of rationalization and trace the contours of a logic of play that resists that regime.'[83]

Along with this fragmentation and reconstruction of their bodies, the characters of Mickey Mouse transform their bodies to reach some specific use: they propel themselves with their tails, blow their bodies as if they were a balloon or make music with their own body. Eisenstein understood these metamorphoses as 'a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form.'[84] In 'Experience and Poverty,' Benjamin understood these practical metamorphoses as having incorporated into their bodies the functions of technology. It could easily be argued that these cartoons teach the audience how to behave as objects, as a society based on the commodity form requires from people (I will come back to this discussion later). However, Benjamin suggests that Mickey Mouse cartoons perform this relation between living beings and technology with humour and, in so doing, mock the wonders and promises which technology has bestowed upon humanity. Such promises have been made in the context of the use of technology by capitalism and therefore do not aim at a liberated humanity, but at the exploitation of nature and man for the profit of the owners of that technology. Hence,

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[82] 'Mickey Mouse,' SW2, p.545.
[83] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p.170.
[84] Eisenstein, p.21.

Benjamin detected in these cartoons both a critique of the reduced scope of the uses of technology by capital and a utopian will to improve humans' organic nature.

Benjamin felt a similar concern towards J. J. Grandville, the nineteenth-century French caricaturist who is frequently present in the *Arcades Project*. As I mention above, Benjamin had read an article from a 1931 issue of the journal *Art et métiers graphiques* in which Pierre MacOrlan analysed Grandville as a precursor of Disney. Benjamin might have perceived in both Grandville's designs and Mickey Mouse films a graphic representation of the expressions that the commodity form took through culture. Both representations made the commodity existence so evident that they were able to unmask the reification created by capitalism and, at the same time, express the dream side of mass culture, which appeared liberated from its exchange value in the representation of impossible situations. In his text on Disney, Eisenstein tried to make a genealogy of similar analogue representations in the past.[85] An obvious analogy was with the fabulists. Eisenstein cites Hippolyte Taine, who argues that fabulists are at the same time painters of animals and of human beings: 'The mixture of human nature, far from concealing animal nature, gives it relief.'[86] Eisenstein briefly recalls Grandville, 'where human nature is absolutely indissolubly interwoven with an image of animals.'[87] Grandville illustrated the metamorphoses described by fabulists such as La Fontaine (in the seventeenth century) and Jean-Pierre Claris Florian (in the eighteenth), in which characters such as the ant and the grasshopper, the wolf and the lamb were anthropomorphised. But Grandville also created his own fables, for example in the collection *Les Métamorphoses du Jour*. There, animals are depicted reproducing the habits, morals and fashions of different social groups in Grandville's contemporary France. The same could be said of *Scènes de la vie privée et publique des animaux*, in which Grandville focuses more specifically on social types, embodied in the different animals of the fauna. Eisenstein sought to understand the recurring historical tendency towards the

[85] Eisenstein writes: 'We are consciously limiting ourselves to three complete "analogies" in theme and form to Disney: Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, Andersen's *Tales*, La Fontaine's *Fables*. An analogy of the "resurrection" of the natural, the animal (not in the sense of "beast", but in the sense of "*das Animalische*") as antitheses: La Fontaine to the seventeenth century (H. Taine), Andersen to the eighteenth (Brandes), *Alice* to the nineteenth, Disney to the twentieth.' Eisenstein, n94.

[86] Ibid., p.39.

[87] Ibid., p.36.

humanisation of animals in cultural production. For him, this tendency is an expression of the 'lack of humaneness in systems of social government or philosophy.'[88] In the case of Disney, Eisenstein thinks that these films are an expression of (and a protest against) the mechanisation of all aspects of life in America and the trends of mathematical abstraction and metaphysics which had become mainstream in philosophy. Therefore, the characters of fables and of Mickey Mouse films are not only plastic metaphors which stress essential human features, but they also show the factual regression of humans into animals.[89]

Benjamin saw a similar technique at work in Grandville's designs. For him, Grandville's images were a symptomatic expression of the economic base.[90] Those expressions were depicted in a sublimated and dreamlike fashion, carrying within them the anxieties and desires of the collective towards material reality. Benjamin understood Grandville as a commentator through fashion and advertisement of his contemporary society. He claimed that the most interesting aspect of fashion for philosophy was the way it 'precede[s] the perceptible reality by years.'[91] Thus, whoever understands that 'semaphore,' said Benjamin, will be able to foresee the new currents in arts and in society. For him, here lies the charm of fashion, although also the difficulty of making such charm fruitful for philosophy. Benjamin understood fashion in the realm of modern phantasmagorias and as part of a

[88] Ibid., p.33.
[89] Eisenstein writes that 'the personification of animals in this moralizing, fabulist manner, has as a sensuously nourishing subtext its own offshoot of totemistic belief in the "factual regression" into an animal.' Ibid., p.52.
[90] Benjamin explored the relationship between base and superstructure in some texts. For example, in the first thesis of the 'Work of Art' essay Benjamin argues that the changes in the base proceed far quicker than those in the superstructure. Thus, those transformations in the base *manifest* themselves *a posteriori* in the superstructure. In this way, the dialectics of the conditions of production make themselves evident in art. This applies also to technology and to how the adoption of technology in production manifests itself eventually in the superstructure. The word that Benjamin uses here to talk about the relation between base and superstructure is 'manifestation.' This description of the base-superstructure metaphor is similar to the one he presented in the *Arcades Project*. There, Benjamin wrote that at first sight, it seemed that Marx wanted to establish a causal relationship between base and superstructure, although his own insights in fact went beyond that connection. For Benjamin, the relation between base and superstructure cannot be one of reflection, but one of expression. Thus, he argues that economic conditions are expressed in the superstructure. Benjamin compares this relation with the image of a sleeper with an overfull stomach, whose dream's content is not the reflection of the dinner but, from a causal point of view, is conditioned by it. Therefore, for Benjamin, the base *conditions* the superstructure, but does not determine it.
[91] AP, convolute [B1a, 1], pp.63, 64.

collective dreamworld. He thought that 'the collective dream energy of a society' (note this term and its relation to the argument made with regard to Mickey Mouse's reception) took refuge 'with redoubled vehemence in the mute impenetrable nebula of fashion.'[92] To illustrate this idea, Benjamin describes one of the designs by Grandville, *La lune peinte par elle-même*, from the book *Un autre monde*. In this drawing, the moon, in the form of a woman, reposes on two fashionable velvet cushions instead of on clouds and looks at her reflection in the waters of a river. There is another design from *Un autre monde* which mocks the capricious power of fashion at the time, *La mode*. A woman who incarnates Fashion handles a wheel in which there are different hats, each over a different year. A group of bourgeois men are waiting for the random decision of Fashion to determine what style of hat must be worn that year. Benjamin understood that in the realm of art and poetry, fashion can at once be preserved and overcome. The caricatures of Grandville offered Benjamin the possibility to carry out this enterprise, namely: to unveil the commodity form that social relations were taking in the nineteenth century through fashion and, at the same time, to rescue the utopian gesture of imagined dreamworlds from its total commodification. For Benjamin, Grandville revealed fashion's real nature by taking it to an extreme and extending its authority not only to objects of everyday use, but also to the cosmos. Thus, in *Pérégrinations d'une comète*, Grandville draws the tail of a comet as if it were the tail of a woman's long night dress. It is in this way that, according to Benjamin, Grandville reveals the fetishism of commodities; or, more accurately, the mysteriousness of the commodity which, according to Marx, abounds in 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.'[93] For Marx, there is nothing mysterious in the use-value of a commodity. However, as soon as an object emerges as a commodity and is placed in relation with other commodities, he argues, it evolves grotesque ideas. In Grandville's designs, it could be argued that the capricious subtleties by which objects accommodate to fashion offer grotesque evidence of the reification of society through the commodity form. These designs remind us of Marx's illustration of those 'metaphysical subtleties' and 'theological niceties.' In the section on the fetishism of commodities in *Capital*

[92] Ibid., convolute [B1a, 2], p.64.

[93] Marx, *Capital*, p.163. Benjamin writes in the *Arcades Project*: 'The subtleties of Grandville aptly express what Marx calls the "theological niceties" of the commodity.' Convolute [G5a, 2], p.182.

volume one, Marx wrote that the grotesque ideas that evolve out of the physical qualities of a commodity—he gives the example of a table—are 'far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.'[94] And here one can return to Mickey Mouse films, where pieces of furniture start dancing to the rhythm set by Mickey. Benjamin, therefore, could see in Mickey Mouse, in a similar fashion to Grandville, an apt expression of the fetishism of commodities. Marx had detected that in the production of commodities, relations between people did not appear as social relations, but as 'material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.'[95] In Christoph Asendorf's words, 'the commodity-producing society humanizes objects, it objectifies humans.'[96] First Grandville and later Mickey Mouse provided graphic representations of this strange metamorphosis caused by the commodity form. Eisenstein argued that the literalisation of metaphors was one of the main sources of humour in Disney. The characters of Walt Disney films are thus the embodiment of a metaphor which is expressed graphically in a character or an action—for example, an animal accepts becoming an object or, conversely, an object is anthropomorphised. In these literalised metaphors, Benjamin might have found an accurate illustration of reification. Thus, while social relations were objectified, the relations between things were animated.

Benjamin was also interested in Grandville because he saw in his designs the secularisation of history into nature that he had analysed years before in his book on the Baroque *Trauerspiel*. For Benjamin, Grandville's designs, by dressing up nature with the fashions of his contemporary society, that is, mid-nineteenth century France, enabled history to be derived from nature—nature understood as cosmos, the world of animals and plants. In designs such as *La lune peinte par elle-même*, Benjamin perceived that history had been 'secularized and drawn into a natural context as relentlessly as it was three hundred years earlier with allegory.'[97] Hence, Benjamin sought to revive the concept of 'natural history' in the nineteenth century through Grandville. Esther Leslie argues that, by turning nature into the latest fashion, 'Grandville's caprices turn historical events into a facet of nature, and so parody the

[94] Marx, p.164.
[95] Ibid., pp.165, 166.
[96] Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, trans. by Don Reneau (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), p.30.
[97] AP, convolute [G16, 3], pp.200, 201.

history of humanity.'[98] As Eisenstein analysed in Disney, in Grandville's designs there was a two-way movement: the anthropomorphised animals stressed and parodied human features and, at the same time, showed a regression towards animal and natural laws. In Grandville, the regression towards natural laws performed by fashion is especially emphasised in a collection devoted to the world of plants. In *Les fleurs animées* Grandville draws women who, in a process of metamorphosis with flowers, end up dressing vegetable outfits *à la mode*. Here the idea of civilisation as a progressive course of development is mocked by showing the transience of nature as the latest fashion which will not last more than a season. According to Asendorf, 'In Grandville's metamorphosis, the commodity is made demiurgically into nature, with nature (life) being delivered up to second nature (the commodity) in the process.'[99] By turning the commodity into a facet of nature and nature into a facet of history, as part of the 'second nature' made by human beings, Grandville unveils the fetishism of a world governed by the commodity form. Marx already thought of commodities in an anthropomorphised form: he did not only imagine a table dancing, but also made a commodity speak.[100] Grandville took these relations further in a parabolic and grotesque way. Walt Disney, in turn, went forward with the representation of the objectified relation between people and the socialised relation between objects. Thus, he animated on the cinema screen those same relations and appealed to the spectators with the same rhythms that moved animals and objects.

## Mickey Mouse's Ambiguity

In the previous chapter, I assessed Adorno's famous response to the 'Work of Art' essay in the letter from 18th March 1936 with regard to Chaplin. As I wrote there, Adorno rejected the conception of collective laughter as either salutary or revolutionary. For him, this laughter was instead full of bourgeois sadism. Benjamin and Horkheimer discussed the first version of the essay and took up some of the first observations by Adorno. The result was not a reformulation of the text, but a number

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[98] Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p.99.
[99] Asendorf, p.36.
[100] 'If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it.' *Capital*, p.166, 167.

of footnotes which deepened the political and philosophical questions arising from the essay. One of these footnotes deals directly with the ambivalence of Mickey Mouse. Benjamin recognises the double meaning of this figure, whose films are ambiguous in their both comic and horrifying effect. The most dangerous threat of this ambivalence is that Mickey Mouse's films accept 'bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence.'[101] Benjamin places this sinister point in the tradition of fairy-tales, but this time in a more shadowy fashion than his generally positive remarks on the genre: 'This renews an old tradition which is far from reassuring—the tradition inaugurated by the dancing hooligans to be found in depictions of medieval pogroms, of whom the "riff-raff" in Grimm's fairy tale of that title are a pale, indistinct rear-guard.'[102] This commentary makes a link between this old tradition in fairy-tales, Mickey Mouse and the pogroms against Jews which took place in Germany at that time. Benjamin certainly fears that film could train audiences in brutal behaviour. This violence and brutality could become vicious and the critical laughter he envisaged could turn into sadistic laughter. If this happened, these films could help to deploy the destructive energies performed by Mickey and his friends in the service of fascism. Esther Leslie writes in this regard that Mickey Mouse's critique of the values of bourgeois humanism 'could turn out to be misanthropy and an accommodation to punishing those defined as outsiders, freaks.'[103]

This is the argument defended by Horkheimer and Adorno in their chapter 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' in which they return to the point outlined in the letter to Benjamin. In this essay, they claim that the protagonist of recent cartoons has become 'the worthless object of general violence.'[104] In fact, earlier cartoons are regarded in higher esteem, since they acted as exponents of fantasy in opposition to rationalism and resembled, to some extent, slapstick comedy. Thus, they shift attention from Mickey Mouse to Donald Duck, who, they think, acts as a target for violence. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the audience could mirror him and learn how to receive their own punishment. This argument stands in relation to the one I introduced earlier about the sacrifice of the individual

[101] 'Work of Art,' SW3, n130.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p.117.
[104] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.138.

in civilisation. Thus, these films are for Horkheimer and Adorno lessons for the individual's renunciation of control over his/her own life. However true this argument is, it does not invalidate Benjamin's point. For him, the problem is that violence among people, animals and objects is conceived of as something natural and even joyful. Hence, this violence could be embraced by the audience and deployed in everyday life. Indeed, it could be inflicted, as Horkheimer and Adorno claimed, on the outsiders.

In the above-mentioned footnote on Mickey Mouse, Benjamin makes the following remark with regard to colour film: 'Their gloomy and sinister fire-magic, made technically possible by color film, highlights a feature which up to now has been present only covertly, and shows how easily fascism takes over "revolutionary" innovations in this field too.'[105] Benjamin could not be referring to the fire in the mirror of Snow White's stepmother in Disney's first full-length film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (dir. David Hand *et al.*, 1937), released one year after he wrote this note. Therefore, Benjamin might be referring to *Mickey's Fire Brigade* (dir. Ben Sharpsteen, 1935), a Technicolor film which depicts Mickey, Donald and Goofy as firemen. Fire appears here in colour and animated—able to run with two legs, to play piano and to attack Donald with an axe. To be sure, this depiction was not very different to previous black-and-white representations of fire in films such as *The Fire Fighters* (dir. Burt Gillett, 1930) or *Mickey's Steamroller* (dir. David Hand, 1934). In those films, fire takes different forms, tickles Mickey's bottom and plays with Mickey's children. Nevertheless, at the same time as being playful, fire in Mickey's *Fire Brigade* is more subjectified, more threatening and more difficult to combat. It is not easy to say to what extent this depiction is achieved by means of colour and in what manner fascism can take advantage of it. In any case, Benjamin probably thought that fire was shown as mysterious, threatening and attractive. As I suggested in chapter three, this attractiveness and mysteriousness were characteristics of the fascist understanding of nature. Benjamin might have thought that these characteristics were depicted thanks to colour and to the technical innovations incorporated by the Disney studio by that time. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Eisenstein saw fire as one of the sources for Disney's animism and for the pleasure of awakening life in an inert object. For Eisenstein, fire is the most capable element

[105] 'Work of Art,' SW3, n130.

for ‘fully conveying the dream of a flowing diversity of forms.’[106] Fire can, in other words, assume all possible guises.

A closer look at *Mickey’s Fire Brigade* shows us that Donald—the clown, the outsider—is not so much the film’s object of violence as is Goofy—the henchman, who follows willingly every order issued by Mickey. At this point, the extent to which the characters in these films are reified should be considered. Many of the animals in these cartoons act willingly as mere objects for the sake of Mickey’s fun—especially as musical instruments. Minnie is, in fact, the only one who responds angrily to Mickey’s use of her body as an instrument. In *The Cactus Kid* (dir. Walt Disney, 1930), for example, Mickey claps Minnie’s cheeks as a drum and pulls her nose. Minnie, who until then had been happily watching Mickey’s performance, gets angry and reproaches him. A similar episode occurs in *The Shindig* (dir. Burt Gillett, 1930). Mickey is making music out of any object (a bucket, a barrel, a paper bag) while Minnie plays the piano. At one point, Mickey decides to play Minnie’s tail as if it were a string and pulls Minnie’s trousers as percussion. Minnie then responds angrily and demands that he stop. Nonetheless, in this objectification of the characters, Mickey Mouse could be read in connection with Sade, who, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, showed that unfeelingness and thingness were at the core of capitalism. Leslie argues that, by doing the same thing, Mickey ‘portrays, unmasks and makes available for criticism.’[107] If one reads Mickey Mouse in these terms, it could be argued that these cartoons disclose the mythical character of the principles which govern the organisation of the body in contemporary society. Nevertheless, however one reads Mickey Mouse, there is always an ambivalence between the reification of the corporeal and the utopian liberation of the body from the fetters of nature.

I wish to argue that Benjamin’s remarks on Mickey Mouse are a particular case in point for the immanent possibility of undertaking criticism within popular culture. Indeed, in a similar fashion to his project on the Parisian arcades, Benjamin sought to redeem the utopian features of this mass culture figure. In his article ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,’ Fredric Jameson reflected on the utopian side of a reified mass culture, concluding that the works of mass culture, even when their

[106] Eisenstein, p.24.
[107] Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p.84.

function may lie primarily in legitimating the social order, have always to unfold 'the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity.'[108] Benjamin's project with regard to Mickey Mouse was similar: he analysed popular culture to understand the objective expression of a society that directed its wishes and anger towards the world of things. He thought that the phantasmagorias of capital produced a dream world to sustain the social order as it was, but, at the same time, that these phatasmagoric images had a side turned to dream, a utopian side which could be rescued. Max Weber understood that, with the triumph of abstract and formal reason as the organising principles of modern capitalism and the state, there had been a rationalisation and a disenchantment of the world. Benjamin, however, thought that, while it was true that there had been a rationalisation in form, capitalism had brought about a re-enchantment of the social world and a 'reactivation of mythic forces.'[109] According to Buck-Morss, the goal of Benjamin in the *Arcades Project* was to develop 'A materialist history that disenchants the new nature in order to free it from the spell of capitalism, and yet reserves all the power of enchantment for the purpose of social transformation.'[110] As I have suggested in the thesis, the historical role of cinema was also to disenchant 'second nature' by dissecting it and, at the same time, to innervate in the collective body a revolutionary—utopian, re-enchanting—discharge. Mickey Mouse provided the collective with an example of technological innervation that could be mimetically incorporated into cinema reception.

However, this could not be a totally successful answer. Mickey Mouse's effect upon the audience was ambiguous. The energy that these films transmitted to the collective could be deployed not only for humane ends, but also released in the form of misanthropic violence. I would like to claim that the possibility of deploying such energy in the interests of fascism or of hatred in general was already implicit in the ambivalence of 'The Destructive Character' and its nihilistic embrace of destruction. In this chapter, I have attempted to present an in depth analysis of Benjamin's interest in Mickey Mouse, in order to understand the wider project behind his engagement with this figure. For this reason I first tried to reconstruct his argument

[108] Fredric Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,' in *Social Text*, no. 1 (Winter, 1979), p.144.
[109] AP, convolute [K1a, 8], p.391.
[110] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1989). p.275.

in comparison with other figures that informed such a project. Nonetheless, the criticism of the way in which the energy that emanates from film can be used should also be borne in mind. Indeed, it should be applied to the whole argument about technological innervation in cinema reception. With this critique, I do not want to invalidate Benjamin's argument; rather, I would like to problematise the all too easy embrace of technological reproduction and some popular figures associated with it.

I have also shown in the chapter that Benjamin's approach to Mickey Mouse cannot be properly understood unless these writings are addressed from the point of view of the 'destructive character' and its inherent critique of bourgeois humanism. It was through this project that Benjamin addressed the historical role that Mickey Mouse could perform with regard to the audience—with its potential and inherent problems. He suggested that humanity would only surpass the stage of so-called civilisation by becoming an *Unmensch* or a barbarian, who had incorporated technology into its own existence. Thus, the audience could find in Mickey Mouse a barbarian to be mirrored. As with the characters of *Lesabéndio*, the audience in the films of Mickey Mouse would explore the ways in which they could be transformed into 'new, lovable, and interesting creatures.'[111] In addition, since Mickey Mouse sets the audience's pace rhythmically, this new creature should come forth at the level of collective existence, transformed into a collective techno-body. Therefore, the argument opened up by Benjamin's early anthropological texts, with regard to the creation of a collective body through the union of humanity with technology, finds one of its closest analogies in the arena of Mickey Mouse's cinematic reception.

[111] 'Experience and Poverty,' SW2, p.733.

## Conclusion

In the conclusion I will present, first, some closing remarks about the philosophical and political project that informed Benjamin's writings on film. And, secondly, I will give some guidelines for any further analysis of Benjamin's film aesthetics and, more specifically, for its application to more contemporary debates within film and media studies. I want thus to take the opportunity to open up some lines of enquiry that I could not address earlier in the thesis and that push for further development in future approaches to the topic.

### Closing Remarks: The Politics of Benjamin's Film Aesthetics

This thesis has shown that Benjamin's writings on film analysed in the first instance the changes of the human sensorium in the interaction of human beings with technology. By addressing these writings in the light of anthropological materialism, I could detect in this project the possibility of transforming the human body by incorporating technology into its own nature. With the concept of innervation, Benjamin understood that technologies could be adapted as prostheses of the human body. Cinema was a paradigmatic training ground in this regard, because it offered the chance to produce a collective innervation of technology through a rush of energy over the audience. Benjamin claimed that film's new aesthetic regime, because of its very technological nature, paved the way for the creation of a collective body. The audience reacted collectively to the film and, therefore, could innervate technology collectively as if it were a *physis*. In fact, Benjamin discerned that such an innervation would be collective with the very meaning of the word that he used to refer to technology, *Technik*, which alludes both to the hardware of the machine and the social relations that follow its use. The debates about 'first' and 'second technology' and about the refunctioning of technological art forms sought to determine the type of technology that the collective should adopt. The 'second technology' that Benjamin wanted the collective to innervate aimed to improve human nature through a technology that discarded its goal of the mastery of nature. The ultimate aim for Benjamin was to transform the body in order to be able to grow,

like Scheerbart's creatures, technological prostheses such as photographic apparatuses and telescopes. In other words, the transformation of the senses which was paramount in the changes that technology was bringing about could be pushed forward in order to imagine new configurations of the body. The idea was to escape from the centrality of the individual, human figure that had prevailed for centuries in bourgeois humanism.

As part of his anthropological-materialist project, Benjamin rephrased the term aesthetics into *aisthēsis*, i.e. perception of the senses, in order to analyse the transformation of the senses through their interaction with technology. The political programme of this project was to recover the full power of the senses by passing through the new technologies. Here is where the political conception of revolution as a collective innervation meets film aesthetics, as a way of training the senses to the new apperceptions required by urban modernity. In a convolute of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin quotes a passage from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and notes that it is connected to his 'doctrine of revolutions as innervations of the collective.' Benjamin cites Marx:

> The transcendence of private property is … the complete emancipation of all human senses …, but it is this emancipation … because … the senses and minds of other men have become my *own* appropriation. Besides these direct organs, therefore, *social* organs develop…; thus, for instance, activity in direct association with others … has become an organ for *expressing* my own *life*, and a mode of appropriating *human* life. It is obvious that the *human* eye enjoys things in a way different from that of the crude, nonhuman eye; the human *ear* different from the crude ear; and so on.[1]

Benjamin perceived in this passage, on the one hand, that human senses were themselves social organs and, on the other, that with the superseding of private property they would be emancipated from their individual, reduced scope under capitalism. Hence, Benjamin thought that, thanks to technologies which were themselves collective, these organs could be more easily recovered. The aesthetics brought about by cinema supplied a training ground for this innervation. As I discuss in chapter two, Marx considered that the human body was part of nature.

[1] AP, convolute [X1a, 2], p.652. Italics in the original.

Furthermore, similarly to Benjamin, Marx argues that in communism, after the supersession of private property, nature would not be approached in terms of utility, but would become human. In a passage that Benjamin skips in the previous quote, Marx states that once private property has been superseded, human senses will be emancipated:

> The eye has become a *human* eye when its *object* has become a *human*, social object, created by man and destined for him. The senses have, therefore, become directly theoreticians in practice. They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an *objective human* relation to itself and to man, and vice versa. Need and enjoyment have thus lost their *egoistic* character and nature has lost its mere *utility* by the fact that its utilization has become *human* utilization.[2]

The early political anthropology of Marx was rooted, as was Benjamin's, in the human body as the source of social life; a human body that is conceived of as nature. Thus, Marx implicitly attacks the utilitarian mastery of nature, because it also damages human nature and, therefore, the human body too. The political goal behind Benjamin's anthropological materialism was, like Marx, to emancipate and liberate the senses, to become social and recover their full power. For Benjamin, therefore, film aesthetics was a rehearsal for creating social organs and, eventually, a collective body.

Hence, in Benjamin's writings on technology, there is a utopian—immanently political—side directed towards a future in which technology has been put to human ends. This technology, freed from any vestige of magic, is the technology that Benjamin demands be incorporated into the human body. It is true that his comments on technology may appear contradictory at first sight. While he criticises technological development because it also embodies the destructive side of technology fostered by the ruling class, he seems to uncritically celebrate the *natural* development of the technologies of reproduction. However, if one pays attention, the 'natural uses' to which Benjamin refers are nothing other than a demystified

[2] Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. and ed. by T. B. Bottomore (London: C. A. Watts & Co., 1963), p.160. Italics in the original.

technology which has been subjected to human purposes. In this way, technology's prime aim is to help humanity to reorganise social relations and create a fairer world.

## Future Lines of Enquiry

Once Benjamin's thoughts on film have been explained and developed, one of the questions that remains to be answered is whether (and how) these theories can be applied to film analysis. Admittedly, this was the first aim of this thesis. When I undertook this project, I wanted to determine how suitable Benjamin's writings on film were for analysing specific films and whether we could talk about them as a film theory. However, my research led me to the realisation that it was necessary to set up a coherent evaluation of these writings before engaging in any further analysis. In this way, the thesis aimed to present an overall vision of the project behind Benjamin's endeavour in order to establish what the main themes and concerns in his approach to film were. In the introduction I suggest that one of the intentions of this thesis was to provide a framework of Benjamin's theories on film in order to present a guideline to those approaches to film which use his theories as theoretical framework for their analyses. In the following, I would like to open up some lines of enquiry which explore Benjamin's film aesthetics beyond the figures that have been analysed in this thesis. I will thus briefly develop some themes which have been left unexplored, but can be relevant for any further analysis of Benjamin's film aesthetics. Hence, in the next pages I will assess Benjamin's short statements on sound film, analyse his conception of montage and duration and, finally, provide some guidelines for a Benjaminian analysis of digital technologies. With these discussions I also aim to address some gaps left by the particular approach of the different chapters in the thesis.

### Sound film

In this section I will introduce a brief analysis of Benjamin's position towards sound film and discuss his view on some films which have not been analysed in the body of the thesis. I will address this question from the point of view of cinema reception, the central theme of Benjamin's reconfiguration of aesthetics. Carolin Duttlinger has

provided some clues as to how this issue might be addressed. In her articles on reception, largely focused on literature and theatre, she has stressed that the type of storytelling which Benjamin hailed always resisted the complete absorption of the audience. For Duttlinger, Brecht's epic theatre was a good example of this reception in a semi-alert mindset, as was oral storytelling. She argues that in modern, technological forms of entertainment, a similar dynamic could take place. For her, silent film was the type of film which could produce a similar reaction to the above-mentioned and, therefore, the possibility of a more politically active response.[3] In this way, she argues, Benjamin not only opposed silent film to the traditional artwork and its reception in museums or galleries, but also to sound film. Duttlinger accurately bases this argument on a letter that Benjamin wrote to Adorno in December 1938:

> It becomes more and more obvious to me that the launching of the sound film must be viewed as an industrial action designed to break through the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, which fostered reactions that were hard to control and politically dangerous. An analysis of the sound film would provide a critique of contemporary art that would dialectically mediate between your view and mine.[4]

Here, Benjamin was referring to Adorno's 'On The Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' (1938) in connection to his own 'Work of Art' essay. Benjamin argues that Adorno was articulating in his essay the negative moments of mass culture in the same way that he articulated the positive. In his opinion, an analysis of sound film could mediate both positions. However, such an analysis never came to fruition. In this fragment, Benjamin certainly places silent film above sound film. He seems to be aware in 1938 of the changes that sound had caused in the type of perception that he had observed and championed in the 'Work of Art' essay. Certainly, these theses had already been written under the supremacy of sound film. Therefore, it can be argued that Benjamin lagged behind the new technological changes that he sought to theorise. The first sound feature-length film to be

[3] Carolin Duttlinger, 'Benjamin's Literary History of Attention: Between Reception and Production,' in *Paragraph* 32:3 (2009), p.282.

[4] *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.591.

commercialised, *The Jazz Singer* (dir. Alan Crosland), was premiered in 1927. By the early 1930s, sound film had become the norm not only in the United States, but also throughout Europe. In the 'Work of Art' essay he reflected, though briefly, on the arrival of sound and colour film. In the footnote about Disney, Benjamin considered colour film to be an *a priori* revolutionary technical advance which had been used for counterrevolutionary purposes by the film industry. In the third version of the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin added that sound impressions enter our unconscious in the same way as visual images—therefore implying the existence of an 'acoustic unconscious.' However, in the above-mentioned letter, Benjamin seems to have recognised that his theses reflected, first and foremost, on silent film. If this were the case, the theses of the 'Work of Art' would be truly belated. To be sure, the films that he most appreciated—and to which he devoted a more detailed analysis—were mainly silent films, such as *Battleship Potemkin* and *The Circus*; although, to be precise, not all the films that he praised were silent, for in Mickey Mouse films sound was one of the most important features. Nevertheless, sound in Mickey Mouse pointed in a totally different direction to the self-enclosed narratives of the classical style. The frantic rhythm of music in these films was part of the shock effects which Benjamin considered to be positive in film in order to train the perception of the audience. As Benjamin said of Mickey Mouse, he was able to direct the whole audience rhythmically. Therefore, the audience was not passively absorbed into the narrative as in later (or contemporary) practices which used sound to give a clearer illusion of naturalism. Adorno was, in fact, very much against those films which, through psychological introspection, made a claim for themselves as works of art ('those snobbish psychological class-A pictures which the culture industry forces itself to make for the sake of cultural legitimation').[5] The difference between Adorno and Benjamin is that the former refused to find the solution in the other extreme. In the famous letter from 18 March 1936, Adorno disagreed with the introduction of Mickey Mouse as an alternative to the type of film that tried to attain auratic features.

[5] Adorno, 'Transparencies on Film,' trans. by Thomas Y. Levin, in *New German Critique*, no.24/25, Special Double Issue on New German Cinema (Autumn, 1981 - Winter, 1982), p.205.

For him, even these cartoons participated in the 'naïve realism' that both agreed to criticise.[6]

An example of the counterrevolutionary use of sound film for Benjamin was Frank Capra's film *You Can't Take It with You* (1938). In a 1939 letter to Horkheimer, Benjamin criticises this film and blames the film industry of being complicit with fascism. He argues that this type of film acts as a narcotic for the masses, because of its naivety and sense of inoffensiveness. Benjamin claims that the critique of plutocracy in the plot, carried out in the context of a 'heart-warming' story and the 'silliness' of its characters, is reactionary.[7] To be sure, this type of moralising plot was—and still is—very common in Hollywood and its international by-products. The critique of the powerful magnate Anthony P. Kirby from a moralistic point of view ('not everything in the world is about money') does not question power relations—or for the same reason those of gender and race. The reconciliation between the good-hearted, eccentric Vanderhof family and the Kirbies comes through a moralising, individual change of mind, creating a new equilibrium—in the form of the wedding between Tony Kirby and Alice Sycamore—which does not alter the destructive character of international capitalism and its involvement in the weapons industry, as is illustrated literally in the case of this film. The infantile behaviour of the characters, which is what eventually leads the evil magnate to change his mind, numbs any desire—not to say any political action—to change the state of affairs that allows such injustices. In his 1963 essay 'Culture Industry Reconsidered,' Adorno argued that Hollywood films want to transform adults into eleven-year-olds.[8] The aim of such infantilism, of which Capra's characters are a faithful reflection, is to make the spectators' development of consciousness regress in order to make them conform to that which already exists. This naivety was, for Benjamin, complicit with fascism, which at the same time was attempting to produce a change 'in spirit'—through war, needless to say—while maintaining property relations unchanged. This film can also be argued to prove Susan Buck-Morss's

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[6] Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), pp.130, 131.

[7] Letter to Max Horkheimer from 18 June 1939. Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007). p.203. Originally in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Briefe*, vol.6, 1938-1940, ed. by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp.304, 305.

[8] Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered,' in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001), p.105.

theories on the anaestheticisation of senses. The simultaneity of overstimulation characteristic of this type of film comes from the continuity of speech and of invisible editing, which blocks out reality, rather than providing a cognitive mode of being in touch with reality.[9]

The use of speech in sound film or, more aptly, in the *talkies* was heading towards a style in which everything should be shown, explained and repeated, thus undermining the alertness and presence of the body in cinema reception. In this way, it can be argued that psychological absorption into Hollywood's 'naïve realism' was blocking the positive potentials that Benjamin saw at stake in the mimetic relation between screen and audience in silent film. According to Benjamin, those reactions were difficult to control and politically dangerous. For him, the shock nature of films engendered a rush of energy through the audience. This energy, in turn, could be used to empower a positive adaptation to technology—although Benjamin recognised that this same energy could also be deployed for self-destructive purposes. The spectators faced the film with a 'bodily presence of mind.' However, in certain film practices in which psychological absorption was pursued, the body was not as actively present as was the mind. In this type of film, the spectators could follow the plot and feel empathy with the characters through the senses of sight and audition alone. Spectators of Hollywood cinema participated in a bombardment of impressions, in a simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness which, according to Buck-Morss, was characteristic of the new synaesthetic organisation of the senses as anaesthetics. In this way, these aesthetics provided a way of obstructing reality by numbing the senses and, therefore, also the sensuous relationship of the subject with the material world. In other words, these films blocked the organism from responding politically. In this way, Buck-Morss suggests that 'How a film is constructed, whether it breaks through the numbing shield of consciousness or merely provides a "drill" for the strength of its defenses, becomes a matter of central political significance.'[10] The conclusion that can be drawn here is that, according to Benjamin, the film industry was reducing our capacity to respond to the film with a corporeal presence which could become collective. Buck-Morss's argument also stresses the relevance of representation, of how form and content are arranged—and

[9] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1989), p.18.
[10] Buck-Morss, p.18.

how they conform to the technical basis of the medium. In Benjamin's comments on *You Can't Take It with You*, we can observe a critique of how the content of the film draws within itself a form that serves as a narcotic for the senses.

In opposition to this kind of film, Benjamin celebrated the gags of Charlie Chaplin. In the texts in which he established a connection between Chaplin's performance and Brecht's theatre, Benjamin clearly criticises—whether directly or indirectly—the psychological absorption in cinema. In the fourth chapter, I compared Chaplin's fragmentary performance with the technique of the epic theatre, which resisted an Aristotelian psychological absorption. Through this comparison I attempted to understand the potential that the audience could draw from the mimetic reception of the actor on screen. In Benjamin's 'theory of distraction' there is always a dialectical interplay between attention and distraction, concentration and absentmindedness. According to Duttlinger, the audience of silent films could practice this type of response through 'a versatile alertness able to respond to the fragmented stimuli of city life without being absorbed by them.'[11] Perhaps Benjamin found that this 'attention in a state of distraction' in silent film was no longer possible in sound film. At this point, one could argue that Benjamin shared with Chaplin a common sentiment of resistance—and a certain melancholic attitude—towards the arrival of sound film.[12] In his essay 'Transparencies on Film,' Adorno mentioned the fact that Chaplin was criticised by many film experts for being unaware of (or for purposely ignoring) cinematographic techniques.[13] Thus, his films were mere photographic renderings of his slapstick gags. Despite this, Adorno recognises that this figure could only have made an impact on screen. Indeed, Benjamin claimed that what made Chaplin special was precisely his inherently cinematographic performance. And, although his films cultivated a very classic, not to say underdeveloped, montage, Chaplin was for him a case in point of the good uses to which film montage could be put. Nonetheless, in order to understand this, it is important to bear in mind that Benjamin's theory of montage is radically different from a standard conception of montage.

[11] Duttlinger, p.281. See the section 'Theory of Distraction' in the fourth chapter.
[12] Although one should bear in mind the following comment by Deleuze: 'We might say that Chaplin is at once one of the directors who most mistrusted the talkie, and one of those who made a radical, original use of it.' Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2001), p.172.
[13] Adorno, 'Transparencies on Film,' p.200.

## Montage and duration

Benjamin's conception of montage stems from his interpretation of temporality in the cinematographic image. He left few notes in this regard and, as we shall see, always situated temporality as a factor external to the image. For example, in a convolute of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin talks about the temporal succession of film in a hypothetical experiment in which the movement of streets, boulevards, arcades and squares of Paris over the years would be shown in just half an hour.[14] In another convolute, Benjamin speaks of the representation of the temporal factor in panoramas through the succession of days by means of lighting tricks.[15] In both cases, if one pays attention, Benjamin speaks of a temporal duration which is external to the nature of the image. Ana Useros has noted that, although for contemporary spectators cinematographic images have their own motion and duration, for Benjamin the image was essentially static.[16] For that reason, he never talked about duration in film, unless it was distorted. For example, in the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin speaks about slow motion in two fragments related to the 'optical unconscious.' Thus, he argues that 'with slow motion, movement is extended' and, therefore, reveals unknown aspects within familiar movements.[17] A more interesting observation comes to light in another convolute in which Benjamin compares the optics of the myriorama and the time of the modern, of the newest. He describes the time of each as 'crossed by countless intermittences.' Then, Benjamin defines the term: 'Intermittence means that every look in space meets with a new constellation.' Finally, Benjamin argues that intermittence is the measure of time in film.[18] Benjamin implied that looking, from outside or inside the image, disrupted

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[14] *Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), convolute [C1, 9], p.83.
[15] Ibid., convolute [Y 10, 2], p.690.
[16] Ana Useros, 'El misterio Chaplin,' in Juan Barja and César Rendueles, eds., *Mundo Escrito: 13 Derivas desde Walter Benjamin* (Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes, 2013), p.85.
[17] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (second version), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.3, 1935-1938 (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.117. See also p.103. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin makes the following remark, similar to the previous ones on panoramas: 'It remains to be discovered what is meant when, in the dioramas, the variations in lighting which the passing day brings to a landscape take place in fifteen or thirty minutes. Here is something like a sportive precursor of fast-motion cinematography—a witty, and somewhat malicious, "dancing" acceleration of time, which, by way of contrast, makes one think of the hopelessness of a mimesis.' AP, convolute [Q1a, 4], p.529.
[18] Ibid., convolute [Gº,18], p.843.

the inner temporal dimension of film and, therefore, was conceived of as montage. In this way, Useros argues that, for Benjamin, montage was not reduced to the change of shot or frame, but also included the disruptions created by the appearance of a character on screen or by the gestures of an actor or actress. For this reason, Benjamin's argument about montage is centred on the figure of Chaplin, because in his fragmentation of the human body through the cinematic image, he saw an exemplary use of montage with which to reproduce and counteract the shock nature of modern life. This particular conception of montage probably explains the fact that Benjamin never comprehended the aesthetic divergences in the different methods of montage of Pudovkin, Vertov and Eisenstein. For this reason, this thesis has developed a more in depth discussion of montage in the chapter on Chaplin than in the chapter on Soviet film.

It is worth noting at this point the radical difference between Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze in their conception of temporality in the film image. Deleuze's point of departure in *Cinema I: The Movement Image* and *Cinema II: The Time Image* was the concept of duration (*durée*) developed by Henri Bergson. For Benjamin, in fact, *durée* was a type of experience only adequate to a poet. Thus, he argues that Proust's monumental work *A la recherche du temps perdu* was the best example of synthetically producing experience in the way that Bergson imagined it.[19] Deleuze, nonetheless, thought that Bergson's conception of duration was particularly suitable to understanding the temporality brought about by film. The standpoint of his argument is that, whereas space covered can be infinitely divisible, duration cannot, because it would otherwise change qualitatively. Hence, duration cannot be reconstituted with immobile sections. In this way, Deleuze argues that cinema does not give a frame to which movement is added, but a movement-image. Although for him cinema is still a reconstruction, it is not recomposed from formal transcendental elements, but from immanent material elements and, thus, it reproduces movements from equidistant instants with the aim of creating an impression of continuity. Finally, he claims that movement is, in turn, a mobile section of the whole and, therefore, this movement can create a qualitative change beyond its own movement. In short, Benjamin and Deleuze depart from two almost irreconcilable

[19] 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.4, 1938-1940, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.315.

understandings of duration in film. The former thinks that time is external to the film image. Thus, Benjamin argues that cinema can distort the duration of an action, that is, of a specific period of time; however, this does not mean that duration belongs to the image. Deleuze, by contrast, argues that cinematographic images have their own duration. Furthermore, the duration of a specific shot or sequence is, in turn, transmitted qualitatively to the whole.

By showing Benjamin's conception of montage and duration, I also wanted to claim that Benjamin's film aesthetics cannot be reduced to a critique of the suture produced by Hollywood classical cinema. His remarks on montage go beyond the usual characterisation of montage as the edition of different shots while, at the same time, are myopic to the profound divergences—and political consequences—of different montage techniques. In this way, Benjamin's writings differed from later film theories that made the effacement of montage the central theme of their aesthetics. Thus, Benjamin's critique of the psychological absorption pursued by Hollywood films may appear to be close to the apparatus theory of the seventies and its critique of ideology, but it is not. The basis of Benjamin's criticism is diametrically opposed to the theory of authors such as Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni. These authors argued that the continuity system in Hollywood sought to mask the apparatus in order to conceal the material conditions of production. This disguise was for them the basis of the ideology implicit in Hollywood productions. Benjamin, by contrast, praised in the 'Work of Art' essay the illusory nature of film, because it was the result of both shooting and editing or, in other words, of a deep penetration of the apparatus into reality. It was through this process of the apparatus's effacement of the image, that film evaded 'beautiful semblance.' This illusion of reality was, in short, a second-degree reality: 'The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice, and the vision of immediate reality the Blue Flower in the land of technology.' [20] Miriam Hansen noticed this radical difference in the point of departure of one theory and the other. Thus, she argued that, whereas apparatus theory criticised the construction of a diegesis that allowed the spectator to identify with the position of a transcendental subject, Benjamin did not dismiss the creation

[20] 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (second version), SW3, p.115.

of a smooth diegesis that presented the illusion of reality. Rather, says Hansen, he saw 'the cinematic crossing of supreme artificiality with physiological immediacy as an opportunity—a chance to rehearse technological innervations in the medium of the optical unconscious.'[21] Hence, although Benjamin criticised psychological empathy with the characters, he praised the sense of immediacy that the audience had in relation to the film. Thus, Benjamin preferred a direct, though mediated, rapport between the audience and film rather than a self-constructed distance that showed and stressed the mediation of technology and the material relations that arise from film production. It is this direct, sensuous relation of immediacy between the spectators and the film that makes silent film the subject of his film aesthetics, rather than sound films which denied, in many respects, the very shock nature of the medium.

### Digital technologies

Finally, I would like to argue that Benjamin's film aesthetics can be very helpful to analyse digital technologies and, especially, the way we incorporate them to our body. In chapter 1 I claim that, with the concept of innervation, Benjamin suggested that technological devices—as simple as they may be—could be adapted as prostheses of the human body. Certainly this argument would speak to many contemporary theories (and not so contemporary, think of Marshall McLuhan) that focus on the tactility and proximity of digital images. Through tactile screens and digital interfaces, the image has arguably become closer to the human body. Whether film reception has become more individually experienced, through increasing viewings on personal devices such as television, laptops, tablets and even mobile phones—or, on the contrary, has become more collective thanks to social networks, the Internet and a growing internationalisation of consumption—should be studied in any further attempt to apply Benjamin's film aesthetics to the digital image. It can be argued that the reception of digital images has become more tactile and digital media have been mimetically incorporated as prostheses into the human body. As a result, the distance between observer and artwork has been shortened and the way we

[21] Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2012), p.174.

perceive and experience images has accordingly been transformed. Benjamin's conception of *aisthēsis*, as an analysis of sense perception, proves to be particularly pertinent to address these questions. Nonetheless, Benjamin's basic contribution to digital studies should not be based on the premise that digital technologies can be incorporated into the human body, but *whether* those technologies respond to the principles of 'second technology' and therefore *should be* adapted. At this stage, the debates about 'first' and 'second technology' and about the refunctioning of technological art forms render particularly relevant in order to determine the type of technology that the collective should adopt. Consequently, digital technologies must be considered with regard to whether or not they embody a self-destructive telos. I would like to claim that here lays the critical impulse which is needed to analyse the aesthetic and social implications of digital technologies. Hence, despite the apparent embrace of technological reproduction as automatically progressive, Benjamin's theories on film and technology are particularly useful for examining the logic behind the conception and reception of some particular technologies. Therefore, a Benjaminian approach to digital technologies should always analyse how those technologies came into being and how they were adopted by the collective in order to determine whether their incorporation into the human body would be beneficial or, by contrast, destructive. This approach would take into consideration whether those digital technologies have been created to pursue a mastering function, whether they have been totally commodified and are possessed by the phantasmagoria of late capitalism, and whether they embody the rationalisation of older technological forms. In any of these cases, an approach informed by Benjamin would find a utopian side which could be redeemed, but the former points should never be overlooked.

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